

“Cleansing”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 18, 2024

1st Sunday of Lent

Psalm 25:1-10

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 7:1-8

Introduction

Using the Gospel of Mark, we have been following the steps, words, and actions of Jesus, the beloved Son of God, the word made flesh, since his baptism by John in the wilderness. Over the past weeks, we have seen how he welcomes sinners and strangers, feeds the hungry in body and spirit, heals the diseased and demon-possessed. This has not gone unnoticed. The disciples and crowds following Jesus, as well as the religious leaders confronting him, are all asking the same question: *Who is this Jesus?*

At this point in the story, and at this point in the Christian year, our eyes – like those of Jesus – are already being trained on Jerusalem, to which Jesus will soon travel and face his final confrontation with those whose traditions he questions and power he threatens; those who have failed to remain faithful to the heart of law: love for God and one another. During this season of Lent, which we have now entered, we are reminded of the power of love that, to be revealed, carries a great cost.

Read Mark 7:1-8

Handwashing, of all things. Mark tells us that Pharisees and the scribes came all the way from Jerusalem to inquire about why some of Jesus’ disciples were eating with defiled, ritually unclean hands.

The Pharisees, despite being portrayed as the critics and enemies of Jesus in the gospels, were popular teachers in their time. Some, like Saul of Tarsus – who becomes Paul, the Apostle – would join Jesus’ movement.

So, just as priests at the Temple washed their hands before approaching the altar, the Pharisees promoted an egalitarianism in which everyone could act like a priest, even if they were not at the Temple or from a priestly family. These practices

allowed Jews everywhere to affirm their identity, to resist assimilation, and to sanctify their bodies.

The point is not hygiene; if it were, they would use some kind of soap or hand cleanser. The point is ritual purity. So, why won't the disciples wash? Do they not see themselves as part of a holy nation, blessed to be a blessing?

On this first Sunday of Lent, we have now entered into a season where Christians focus on our faith practices: rituals and traditions that bring us closer to God and in service to each other. During these forty days, many of us choose to give up or take on practices of prayer or fasting, study or hospitality, service or alms giving. I enjoyed the opportunity to discuss some of these intended practices with those of you who came on Wednesday to receive ashes.

This year, as a Lenten practice, I am choosing to utilize our daily devotional, *Local Pilgrims*, and to pay attention to what I am noticing about how God is present and at work in our community. I am also following a daily, online practice of lengthening meditation, starting with one minute of silence on Ash Wednesday; building up to forty minutes on Holy Saturday. I am also committing to forty minutes of physical exercise on each of the forty days – taking Sundays off – a mix of walking or running, biking or basketball.

In addition to these added practices, I am also choosing to give up drinking alcohol and eating meat. For many people, these are already standard practices, but for me, they are changes that I anticipate will be good for my body and soul and maybe help the planet as well.

Of course, I choose these practices in light of today's passage as part of the over-arching narrative we have encountered in Mark's gospel. Almost throughout, we have witnessed Jesus being confronted by these Pharisees and scribes about who he and his disciples welcome, what food they eat, and, now, whether they properly wash their hands.

Mark calls these practices of the Jewish faith "the traditions of the elders," meaning that they are additions to the law; a way of building a fence around the law, to preserve the Jewish faith and way of life, especially in the midst of Roman occupation. The concern of the Pharisees and scribes when they saw Jesus' disciples eating with unwashed hands was about something much more serious than proper hygiene. They suspected that the carelessness of Jesus and his disciples with regard to these practices threatened to undermine respect for God's law.¹

¹ Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

The problem with the Pharisees and scribes, according to Jesus, was that they became so focused on the externals of faithfulness that they neglected to examine their own hearts. Their efforts to live faithfully were putting up walls of alienation instead of drawing them closer to God and to their neighbors. The rituals they observed created a spiritual hierarchy between the “clean” and the “unclean.” Instead of expressing the holiness of God, ritual purity became a means of excluding people considered dirty or contaminated.

Jesus tells us to beware when piety gets in the way of fulfilling the heart of the law: loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength; and loving others as yourself. He warns us to beware when our piety separates us from others; for, then, it is also separating us from God.

Yesterday, I attended – virtually, via YouTube – the funeral service of my mentor and former colleague Dee Hamilton Wade, who after twenty-two years of ministry, retired from the Anchorage Presbyterian Church in Louisville. I worked alongside Dee for four years, learning from him, being challenged by him, coming to appreciate, as the column he wrote for the Synod newsletter was entitled, “A Natural Grace.”

Dee would sometimes leave me notes on my desk, asking me to visit a church member or lead a meeting, that would read: “This is your mission, should you choose to accept it...” and conclude with: “this note will self-destruct in ten seconds.” Thus, almost every time I prepare for one of these ministry tasks, or take a walk to look for God at work in the world, or print out the copies of my Sunday sermons, or take off my glasses and gesture while preaching, I think about all that Dee taught me.

Many of the rituals that we employ to navigate the challenges of the world and our days are learned practices; traditions that have been handed down to us from others. Pharisees employed what Mark calls the tradition of the elders. Jesus, like the Pharisees, adapts the traditions he inherited and sometimes adds to it. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus adds to the law against murder an injunction against anger; to the law against adultery, he adds an injunction against lust.²

Jesus does not dismiss the issue of defilement as insignificant. He does not declare the Mosaic law unimportant. He disagrees with these scribes and Pharisees’ interpretation of certain laws. He reasserts the law’s basic concern to be about restraining evil and avoiding defilement. He will go on to state, later in this chapter, that what makes us unclean is not what we put into our body, but what comes out from within: the harmful words that we speak and actions we take; slander, wickedness, envy and the like.

² Amy-Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner’s Guide to the Good News*, p. 46

Jesus calls these Pharisees hypocrites and quotes from Isaiah against them, saying: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines,” and concluding: “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

When Jews criticize other Jews, we recognize the critique as insider language, as parents might criticize a child. But when Jesus’ words are taken out of their Jewish context and put into a text that becomes part of the Christian canon, the effect is not insider critique designed to help people get back on the right path. We all get off track at one time or another, we all need sharp words to wake us up. The problem is not human traditions, but those that have risen to supplant the good news of God.

And so, maybe, here is the good news to be found in this text. Being a follower of Jesus is not about separating ourselves from those considered unclean or less holy. He eats with sinners and tax collectors, he touches lepers and dead bodies, he preaches to pig farmers and engages in conversation with pagans and Gentiles.³

Following Jesus means that, like him, we get our hands dirty, serving others, and caring, especially, for those whom the world has forgotten or cast aside. True faithfulness is not about clean hands, but a heart cleansed and a life shaped by the self-giving love of God that we see in the life – and death – of Jesus Christ.

Jesus did not do away with the law; he adapts the tradition. Just as the John the Baptist adapted the tradition of immersion for ritual purity into a ritual calling for repentance of sin, Jesus did not do away with practices like handwashing. Instead, he challenges us to consider that when we are at the table – whether the Lord’s Table or in a fellowship hall or at a picnic – do we attend properly to what we say, who we welcome, how we seek to reconcile? Or, are we participating in rituals and practices that separate, that demean others and encourage or perpetuate violence or division?

Therefore, in this season of Lent, let us go about the practice of becoming *Local Pilgrims* in our community; paying closer attention to what we say and do while journeying in the midst of our neighbors. Let us build upon the traditions of acceptance and inclusion learned from our fore-bearers in the faith, adapting our rituals and practices in ways that will offer welcome and grace. Let us discern how and when piety gets in the way of fulfilling the law and remember that, while forces of chaos or evil may be around us, it is what goes out from within – harmful acts and uncaring words – that sometimes create the most damage.

People of God, followers of Christ, this is our mission, should we choose to accept it. Amen.

³ Angela Deinhart Hancock from *WorkingPreacher.com*