

**“So We Really Don’t Have to Wash  
Our Hands Before We Eat”  
A Sermon by Rev. Martha (Missy) Shiverick  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
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Text: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

“Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiles hands? He said to them, Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘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.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

“For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

O.K. – Let’s start this right off by saying to the children that are in the congregation that if you are not going to listen to anything else in the sermon this morning, contrary to what you just thought you heard in the Scripture passage and might infer by my sermon title, Your mother is right, you still must wash your hands before you eat.....

Good, now that we got that taken care of, let’s dig into this morning’s lectionary text and here what God’s good news is for us.

The Pharisees were concerned about the Jewish people living in an occupied country as a minority religion. Would the Jews pick up traditions and cultural habits that would defy their religion? Would they eventually join the outside society and pick up life styles that were against the Laws of Moses and God's Covenant? In this morning's passage, Jesus and his followers are traveling throughout Israel teaching and healing. The Pharisees come to see who this popular rabbi with his strong following is. They listen and observe him and find that he is not following traditional Jewish dietary Law. A conflict emerges. No wonder we perceive the Pharisees to be the religion police, always questioning whether God's Laws were being kept. And in this passage I just read, they are no different. They perceive Jesus and his followers eating without first washing or purifying their hands which is a violation against religious rules. So they accuse Jesus of not following God's Law.

I try to understand the Pharisees and their point of view and am struck by their need for such literal interpretations to God's Law. But their fears are warranted. What will happen to their faith, their special covenant with God if the Jewish people take on pagan traditions and do not follow the Laws of Moses and the Torah? What will happen if they assimilate into the culture that surrounds them with value differences and cultural norms that are contrary to theirs? And then you read some of these dietary Laws and realize that they are good. They are healthy. It is good to wash your hands before you eat, particularly when you live in a society where the practice is that you eat with your hands. In one of my less sophisticated moments, I ran into this cultural practice head on. After my freshman year of college many, many years ago, I traveled with a friend to England. We truly were the naïve Midwestern girls experiencing life. We were invited by some Kuwaiti young men who were in college there to come to dinner at their homes for a traditional Arab meal. We got there, and knew, just as Dorothy had, that we were not in Kansas or Ohio any more. Their music was different, the dinner was spread out on the floor and not a dining room table, and they made a VERY big thing about everyone washing their hands before they ate. I mean it was a very big thing. I remember my girlfriend and me giggling about it at the time. And as dinner started, we realized just how important it was when even though my first thought was that they did not have enough silverware, I soon came to realize that part of the traditional dinner was that we ate with one of our hands. It certainly is a good reason for the hand washing custom and I would assume for the Jewish Law. And the same

goes for other Laws as well. It is good to clean your food first before you eat it, to wash the pots and pans that you cook in, and you probably shouldn't eat pork if it is full of bacteria that can hurt you.

But the Pharisees had the other worries as well. Their end goal was for the Jewish laws to separate their people from others and make them keep their traditions and culture which defined them. What if people lost the very things that defined them as a people of God? I imagine it must have been a lot like the Amish trying to stay outside of our society to keep what they think is of most value to them. Their laws and customs have them live as islands in but very outside of our culture. They are able to maintain closeness because the strict lifestyle laws separate them and make it hard for outsiders to enter in. And as the two cultures came into such close contact as they did in Jesus' time, the Pharisees most likely became more adamant and police like in their insistence of traditions and strict following of rules and Laws. We can understand it as we are living in a time period where this is happening again.

Some feel that the rise in fundamentalism is a reaction of differing societal norms, religions, cultures, and beliefs all living in a world with multi media and instant communication which forces interfacing and intermingling of peoples. We no more can prevent our daughters and sons from living in the culture of sex, drugs, and instant gratification than the Muslim, the Jew, and the other religious people of our day. So we try and teach them our Christian culture, our ethics, and the Laws of our God, to help them navigate through the sea of conflicting values. And some feel that the wave of fundamentalism is a way in which we are fighting this amoral cultural climate. Cynthia Campbell writes in the August 22<sup>nd</sup> Christian Century Magazine, that the fundamental Christian movement springs from just that. She says, "There seems to be a need to find ways to guard the borders of religious identity. All sorts of issues are lifted up as identity-defining, and the stance one takes with respect to them determines whether one is a real "Christian". In the American context, most of these issues have to do with human sexuality. Abortion, contraception, and homosexuality have all been made into boundary-defining issues; they have become the lines in the sand for whether one judges others to be Christian or not.' Maintaining a certain stand of issues has become the measuring stick for whether an individual is a member of the religious community or not. It is a phenomenon that is permeating our world, our society, and certainly our politics today.

In this last Wednesday's Metro section of the Plain Dealer the headline article was about the race for Governor. The article discussed a group of ministers who have endorsed one candidate over another because of his stance on abortion, same-sex marriage, and the placement of the Ten Commandments in public buildings. The group of ministers is headed by Russell Johnson of Fairfield Christian Church in Lancaster. They saw their endorsement of Ken Blackwell to be a moral responsibility and have repeatedly questioned Ted Strickland's moral convictions in spite of the fact he is a minister. Strickland was stunned by the argument over which candidate is more religious and stated there were other issues that needed to be discussed and debated. Strickland answered the Clergy for Blackwell group's criticism by saying that he didn't think people cared which one of the two candidates was more religious than the issues of job creation, health care, quality education, and affordable college. It sounds a lot like the Pharisees and Jesus. Perhaps the reason these modern day Pharisees are policing the "Christian Way" is out of the same fear the Biblical Pharisees had about breaking God's Law. They are trying to maintain Christian faith, Christian identity and integrity, in an increasingly secular world.

A group formed in Ohio this year to combat the increasing merger of religion and government. It is called "We Believe Ohio" and one of its core values is religious pluralism and religious tolerance as opposed to self-righteous religious certainty. I was at their opening meeting which was comprised of religious leaders from all different faiths and traditions. The thing that brought us together was the conviction that a few laws and individuals should not dictate what is right in God's eyes for the rest. Just as Jesus taught us that it is more important to uphold the large Ethic than to live by many smaller rules we live by, we need to form opinions on what it is that we truly hold as central to our faith in action and measure everything by that. If we believe in diverse religious expression, then we can not go along with anything that sounds like self-righteous piety.

Jesus answered the Pharisees by stating that what defiles a person is not what comes from the outside (meaning dirt or bacteria that can be removed by washing) but rather from what comes from inside the person. It is our unclean actions, our sins of faith that make us un-pure, not by choosing to go against the many, many insignificant laws that might be there to define us.

What is interesting here is that the Pharisees are talking about the same thing that Jesus is, but the two are taking different approaches. The Pharisees are

concerned with following the Law to keep religious purity and Jesus is saying that it is what is inside you, what is inside your heart that is important and keeps us pure. Their concerns were the same. Their approaches were different. And Jesus says to look at the end product, if you are just following a Law but are living in an immoral way, what good is the Law. It is what is in your heart that is important. As Henri Nouwen wrote in his book, Letters to Marc about Jesus, “The spiritual life has to do with the heart of existence. I find the word ‘heart’ a good word. I do not mean by it the seat of our feelings as opposed to the seat of our thoughts. By ‘heart’ I mean the centre of our being, the place where we are most ourselves, where we are most human, where we are most real. In that sense the heart is the focus of the spiritual life.” To Jesus, the Law is only as good as what is inside your heart. Everything else is measured by that.

I guess one of the messages for us today is to be skeptical whenever someone defines being a Christian by a narrow set of guidelines. We must measure, just as Jesus did, the laws over God’s commandment to Love. Campbell says “the problem arises when religious practices and doctrines that are intended to bring life and health to the spirit and community become barriers to reaching out to others with the love, justice and mercy of God. We do not want our human traditions to substitute for God’s Greatest Commandment. We want to define our Christian lifestyle, our traditions, moral principals, and values so that we do not loose what is of value in our pluralistic society which is often at odds with what we believe. Jesus offers us a measuring stick in which to do this and also a warning in this morning’s scripture passage. He says we are not to be so worried about following so many laws. Our integrity and identity can be measured by what is within us and whether we are acting in a loving manner. When asked what is the greatest commandment of all?, Jesus boiled it all down to loving God and neighbor. The good news is that this same measuring stick applies to us as well.

Oh, and this means that the second message is that we really should wash our hands. Spreading germs just isn’t neighborly. Amen.

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