

“Don’t Wash Your Hands, Cleanse Your Heart”

Steve Ramer
August 25, 2019

Scriptures

Matt 15:1-20

1 Then the Pharisees and scholars from Jerusalem come to Jesus, and say, 2 "Why do your disciples deviate from the tradition of the elders? For instance, they don't wash their hands before they eat."

3 In response he asked them, "And why do you also break God's commandment because of your tradition? ... 6 So you end up invalidating God's word because of your tradition. 7 You phonies! How accurately Isaiah depicted you when he said, 8 "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 9 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' "

10 And he summoned the crowd and said to them, "Listen and try to understand. 11 It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person; rather, it's what comes out of the mouth that defiles a person." 12 Then the disciples came and said to him, "Don't you realize that the Pharisees heard you and were offended by what you said?"

13 He responded, "Every plant that my heavenly Father does not plant will be rooted out. 14 Never mind them. They are blind guides trying to lead blind people. When a blind person guides another blind person, both are gonna fall into some ditch."

15 Then Peter replied, "Explain the riddle to us." 16 He said, "Are you still as dim-witted as the rest? 17 Don't you realize that everything that goes into the mouth passes through the stomach and eventually comes out when you're in the outhouse? 18 But things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these are the things that defile someone."

Sermon

Today's passage reminds me of a story, maybe true - maybe not?

it's about a young boy maybe 11 or 12 years old.

A precocious child who was very involved with the church at an early age and quite familiar with the Bible

(probably because he was raised in a family where the Bible was quoted quite often).

An intelligent boy, quick witted and very funny

(others would surely add: smart mouthed or smart alicky).

Anyway, one evening as this young man rushed in the door for dinner.

(typically after repeated calls in order to tear him away from his afternoon play somewhere on the farm.)

But this time the routine is a bit different as he plopped himself down in his usual place around the table, (his spot being between an older brother on the left and his dad at the head of the table on his right and his much beloved older sister directly across).

But none of this is unusual or out of place except for one thing - he has forgotten to wash his hands!

His mom, in her rush to get the piping hot food to the table manages to remind her youngest to hurry and wash up so all can eat. After all, they live on a farm and who knows where his hands have been?

But this time there is a pause, as a wry smile spreads across the boy's face and with a twinkle in his eye he confidently recites from the same passage that we read from Matthew this morning.

"Are you still as dim-witted as the rest? 17 Don't you realize that everything that goes into the mouth passes through the stomach and eventually comes out when you're in the outhouse? However, eating with unwashed hands doesn't defile anybody."

And well, I will leave to your imagination what happened next!"

The story is illustrative not so much of Jesus' point but of the literal and far too simplistic response of his disciples.

One word of warning, before I proceed with the rest of my sermon, boys and girls "do not try this at home!"

I would strongly advise that you never call your mother "dimwitted" or try to get out of stuff by quoting scripture.

Washing hands is very important.

But if Jesus' point is not to encourage future generations of children to reject necessary sanitation, then what is his point?

To make his point Jesus borrows several sayings not only common of his day, but that are still common today. Be careful of what you say, since words have consequences. What comes out of your mouth, especially in moments of anger, or because of hate, or even in indifference,

can cause a whole lot of pain and sorrow.

And similarly, those who cannot see where they are going or who do not know what they are doing are not the best guides.

But Jesus is up to something more than just repeating common aphorisms. The Pharisees have attacked Jesus' disciples lack of ritual piety, but Jesus gave it right back to them calling them unfit guides since they were actually blind to the clear teachings of God.

They were so concerned that the world around them would stain their otherwise pure lives that their words as well as deeds were a curse to those around them.

They were thoroughly corrupt and so Jesus attacked the very core, or the "heart," of what supports their social and religious power.

Jesus was making a sweeping, (everybody say it with me, "a sweeping") rejection of all regulations that govern religious purity and pollution.

Jesus was challenging their inherited traditions which he reminded them were only human devised institutions. He was calling them out, the very guardians of the status quo, as being merely blind hypocrites!

They are the ones, not his disciples, who were impure and unfit to lead. Just imagine the hilarious scene he asked his audience to imagine. Fastidiously dressed Pharisees in their white linen robes, with their long phylacteries swaying as they stumbled, hand in hand finally falling into a ditch filled with garbage and human excrement. Their white robes soiled as they literally reek of impurity.

Let me make it clear, the washing of hands, for the Pharisee's, was not a sanitary concern but a deep matter of religious tradition. For them the ritual of washing, in their minds, kept the religiously pious pure and separated from the rest of society that considered religiously polluted.

These purity rituals were also a way to maintain social status. Those who failed to follow the codes were either pagan foreigners, or other marginalized folks; the poor, women, the sick and the disabled.

Instead of caring for the poor the religious establishment had banished them, not only from being able to participate in religious observances but pushed them to the bottom rung of social power.

Of course, not all traditions are oppressive.
In fact, all religions are based upon rituals that are shared and thus, make the group distinct and attractive.

Rituals are not all bad but those that divide or exclude, whether intentionally or unintentionally must change.
It is okay to be distinctive, to be different and genuine, but we must put aside that which unnecessarily excludes or divides.

We Mennonites have a very unfortunate history when it comes to separating ourselves from those who might pollute our religion.
It is of course easy to pick on the excesses of the past but it is far more important that we do not become complacent.

Do we have rituals or practices that separate us or exclude others?
What are the rituals here at FCMF that we consider important?

For instance, what comes out of our mouths every Sunday morning?
English! "no se habla espanol."

Is this a necessary distinctive or is it an unnecessary division?
Do we come across as too politically narrow?
How about age, or class, education or culture?
All of these have an impact on what we sing, on how we sing, on what topics get preached about, or who gets to preach.
How we pray and especially on how long we're in church on Sundays.
How open are we really to other experiences?

One problem of only worshiping with folks who are like us is that the rituals make so much sense and feel so right, but this comfort keep us blind to what might exclude others.

Are we ready to give up some things that we cherish?
Now I do not have anything specific in mind this morning that I think needs immediate review.

However, I still want us to consider the question and not just assume all is fine and dandy.

If you have some concerns or have felt even a bit excluded, say something. Talk to me or an Elder.

If you hear of someone else's concern please listen carefully. Of course we may not be able to meet every wish and desire, but what we should be able to do is listen carefully and to value each others' perspectives.

I believe that divisions often occur when folks simply do not feel heard or that the group doesn't value them.

And of course, the longer one is part of a particular tradition the harder it will be for them to step outside the tradition in order to critique what might be doing more harm than good.

Let's just hope that we are not headed blindly toward some muddy ditch. Careful listening, healthy communication and a serious consideration of our past will hopefully keep us true to what God is calling us to. As Jesus warns all of us, rituals that only clean the surface and prevent us from encountering those around us are not enough.

Our religion must go deeper and clean out our hearts.

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