

August 29, 2021 - Pentecost 14

But Jesus and his disciples did wash their hands, right?

This Gospel passage contains some challenge in reading it through a modern hygiene-knowledge lens, particularly as public-health-conscious as we have needed to be to navigate the world we've lived in the past year and a half in particular.

If you got hung up on this like I did, I'll warn you next week is the story of Jesus healing by spitting in dirt and rubbing the mud in a blind man's eye to heal him.

Neither of these prominent stories in Jesus' public ministry translate well to public health consciousness. Last year, I reviewed the spit-mud healing story leading up to the next Sunday and said, "Jesus, I think I'm going to preach the epistle text this time around, if you don't mind."

And I really didn't expect we'd be coming back to these "dirty stories" in such a similar context of concern for cleanliness 'cause of COVID after another year had passed.

But here we are.

And here is this story Mark recounts for us, which readers of the Greek are known to chuckle at, given its mocking tones toward the ridiculous practice of ... dishwashing?! Rinsing the produce after bringing it home from the market?

Again, to our modern ears, a signal has to be sent to the brain to say, "what were these guys thinking? Had Jesus and his companions spent a little too long in the desert sun by this point? ... and why am I finding myself instinctively sympathetic to the Pharisees in this exchange?"

I wish the Spirit had granted Mark the foresight to put in another, more credulous parenthetical, ensuring us Jesus and the rest scrubbed for 20 seconds, maybe singing the

“Happy Birthday” jingle twice through, got in between the fingers and around the thumbs and used the best soap available to them. But my concerns of today – and perhaps your own – were not the gospel author’s.

The strong rebuke with which Jesus defends himself and his meal partners seems a bit heavy handed. Not much more indignant, I don’t think, than some of the younger members of my household get with me when I insist I didn’t hear that water running long enough to feel confident they are prepared to eat with clean hands.

There’s more going on here than meets the eye.

The Pharisees’ concern isn’t a paternalistic proclivity for ensuring the teacher and his disciples were going to avoid an unpleasant bout of food poisoning. But the ritualistic handwashing complete with prescribed prayers to which they allude did *begin* as a practice with a positive pietistic intent.

The ritual took root in the laws found in Deuteronomy and originally applied to priests. The pharisaical school of thought sought to apply this level of mindfulness, of holy living and being set apart, to the *wider* Jewish community to maintain solidarity and a distinct identity in the face of occupation and subjugation, now under the Romans but with the Babylonian and Assyrian captivities still painting their present with the traumatic echoes of the not-so-distant past.

And there was nothing wrong with that original intent. It served the Jewish people well. Until it didn't. And it's not as if the people woke up one day and everything had changed. It was gradual. It was insidious. Perhaps it wasn't even all that purposeful. But it warped. Through the years, what began with the purest of intentions had come to have an impact very much opposite of what first was meant.

Instead of giving people a practice to help remember who they are, their belonging to God, their inherent worth and value ... it had become just another burden laid upon

them under already difficult circumstances. Another thing to remember to do and to do it right, as the parameters for doing so became increasingly burdensome and complex. Its purpose became an outlet for powerful authorities to have an excuse to tell powerless people, “You’re doing it wrong. And we’re better than you. And don’t you forget it.”

And it took boldness for Jesus to stop it and say, “Enough.”

As the followers of Christ, it takes us courage to have such a sharp eye toward customs, practices and traditions we take for granted because that’s the way it’s always been. It’s what we know.

We’ve become fond of saying we hope to get back to normal soon. I catch myself saying it, too, the longer the pandemic drags on, the more other troubles of the world seem to pile up with little hope of remedying them quickly or with much ease, if at all.

But the best version of ourselves, as individuals and as a faith community alike, is not identical to what it was in January or February 2020. Not everything we did then will make sense in January or February 2022, or whenever a new normal can be established. And we are encouraged to take a hard look at why we do the things we do and have done and whether they serve the same purpose for which they were intended. If they have grown and grown us spiritually. Or if they need tweaking. Or replacement. Or to be put behind us altogether. We have to take a hard look at the things we expect in our faith life and consider whether they benefit us, inspire our hope in the face of challenges, or if they burden us or those who take them on on our behalf beyond what can be sustained. And be willing to look at them critically but not condemningly, thanking God for what they have been but not relying on rote repetition to force them to be what they no longer can be.

We are also called to consider the output of our lives. If it's indeed hubris, slander, deceit and the like, it gives us no benefit to continue it. Nor to try and cease, but still to dwell on it. We can look to God to help and guide us to do better. To be better. But we won't always have the clearest eyes with which to see when we have sinned against others. Some of the help which we must ask of God is to value critique and criticism. To swallow our pride and not reflexively go on the defensive.

Just as it can be a challenge to read a 2,000-year-old account of a mealtime dispute in at least less-than-sterile conditions, and listen beyond our own concerns, it can be a challenge to hear of the hurts the church has caused people outside of it, maybe especially from those who once were in it. It can be difficult to think of ourselves as not living up to what we aspire. But if we are honest, we know that's the case. And our witness is stronger when it's honest. When it's vulnerable and unvarnished. When it's real and its intents are

clear and true and not self-interested, but interested in genuine improvement in the world and the lives of the people who live in it.

Because I think the world is hungry. But it seems increasingly evident not so much for what Christ's church has been. But I believe more so for what it *can be*. There is a foundation, the bones are good ... but we can't get tied up in the window dressing. Too much is at stake.

I invite you to pray with me.

Jesus, we are honored to be your church. We thank you for everything you have done in our lives and the gift of your church to help us follow you. We are so caught up in a fog right now of what the future holds but help us to trust that our Father holds us in the palm of God's hand and lifts us up to show us the way. Help us to be patient but not complacent. Eager but not overzealous. Welcoming to correction but confident in our capabilities. Help us see a little bit clearer, with even just a fraction of the vision you have for us to be your hands and feet in the world in which we live. We ask you to help us be what we cannot be on our own. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.