

Rev. Dan Welch Pentecost 14
8-26-18 Text- Mark 7: 1-13

Clean hands are important. When you walk into a restaurant you expect there to be a place for you to wash your hands before you eat and you trust that all the workers take seriously their duty to wash their hands, too!

Hand sanitizers are popping up everywhere, and not just at the entrances to hospitals. As a matter of fact, I keep a little bottle of hand sanitizer underneath my chair up here. I make use of it before distributing communion and before shaking hands at the end of Service. I use to only do that during cold season but now just to be safe, I do it year round.

And yet if you think about it, who's to tell us when our hands are *truly* clean? Scientists? Doctors? Teachers? Parents? Employers? Or do we rely on our own sight or smell? There are some people who argue we've so sanitized our world, including our hands, that our children are growing up *less* healthy than we did, more susceptible to resistant microbes. Be that as it may, the concern of clean hands is really very minor when we compare it to the question of a clean *heart* and that's the point Jesus is making in today's Gospel reading.

Some time ago, a Hollywood celebrity, as part of a high-profile

visit, had the chance to spend an afternoon with the president of Taiwan. Perhaps surprisingly, the topic this celebrity wanted to pursue was the treatment of dogs in Taiwan. Please don't get me wrong, humane treatment of animals is certainly important, but if you had one chance to speak to the president of a country, would *that* be the issue you'd focus on?

Last weekend a movie was released called "An Interview with God". The movie tells the story of a journalist struggling in his return home from a war zone who then dives deeply into the story of a life time: an interview with a mysterious man claiming to be God. I have not seen the movie, but I find the tagline of the movie to be very intriguing: "If you could ask God any question what would it be?"

Wow, we could spend a lot of time on that! But instead let's turn to our Gospel lesson from Mark chapter 7 where some Pharisees had their chance to ask Jesus a question.

First some quick background information. At the end of Mark chapter 6, we read about how people were coming from all over to be healed by Jesus. The excitement was contagious! But, now in Mark 7 that joy from the crowds is replaced with the grim, serious concern brought forth by the pestering Pharisees. These religious elites

start grilling Jesus about the ritual cleanness of His disciples' hands. Here again is how that went from our Gospel reading: "Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. . . . And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?'" (vv 1-2, 5). That was their **one** interview question to Jesus.

*If **you** had the opportunity for a private conversation with the Son of God, would you argue about the proper way to wash up before a meal? I know I wouldn't! Now, it may even be that this was not a matter of the disciples not washing their hands, but of not washing their hands thoroughly **enough** to meet the Pharisees' high standard of prescribed ceremonial, hand-washing before each meal. What's going on here though, is that Jesus' opponents have completely lost sight of what really matters before God. The way they ask their question suggests that the root of the problem is that they've begun to put human concerns before and above what's important in God's eyes. Our initial sympathy with the Pharisees' concern over clean hands at the table goes right out the window*

when we begin to see the **real** problem in all its seriousness.

When I was a boy wanting to pass "bath-time inspection," I quickly learned that my mother was not going to check the easy-to-reach obvious places like my hands or stomach. If I wanted to be declared "clean," I had to make sure I washed behind my ears and between my toes. Jesus reminds His questioners that they still need to learn this lesson. Centuries before, through His prophet Isaiah, the Lord had tried to teach Israel to check for **true** cleanness by considering their **hearts**. Jesus quotes Isaiah in our Gospel lesson: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (vv 6-7).

Right after this, Jesus goes on to speak of the Commandments God gave through Moses and how these ancient words of God should be shaping the lives and thoughts of His hearers. Instead, the Pharisees were making up rules that ended up leading people away from keeping God's laws. For example, the law of Corban, where a person could say to their parents 'Whatever good I was going to do for you for the rest of your life, I give as an offering to God,' and then they no longer had to follow God's commandment to

“Honor your father and mother.” Or so taught the Pharisees!

But Jesus sets them straight! It is clear from our Gospel lesson, as well as several other places too, that Jesus is much more interested in relationships than regulations! Love for God and love for one’s neighbor, especially including one’s parents, is the true fulfillment of the Law. There is no Law that is greater, especially not a man-made law.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were more concerned, with outward appearances, about whether people’s hands are clean than whether their hearts have been filled with the peace Jesus is proclaiming. And there is a very important lesson for us to learn from this. We need to examine our own lips and hearts and heads and hands to see how **we** are doing. Have we in any way, like the Pharisees before us, lost sight of what’s important? What traditions of men, what traditions of *our own*, have we let crowd out God’s Word from its proper place as the Word that demands our total obedience? For example, does work or leisure time on Sunday mornings **continually** replace receiving God’s gifts of forgiveness of sins and strength for our faith which God gives to us in the Divine Service? Even if it’s done in the name of “family time”. Or are there any ways where we have we

stopped caring about the hearts of those around us and instead taken to examining the cleanness of their hands? For example, do we ever list excuses why we shouldn’t have to help someone in need, when we know we have the ability to do so. (Or do we try to rationalize why it’s okay for us to hate someone rather than confess that sin of hatred and asking God to help us to love them as we ought and to see them as **He** sees them, that is, as ones worthy of His loving sacrifice on the cross?) Those are tough words of God’s Law, but words each of us needs to hear.

Human traditions may set standards for **outward** cleanness, but they can never make us clean **within**. Jesus points out the true source of the Pharisees’ uncleanness because He wants to make them clean just as He wants to make all people clean, including you and me. That was the whole purpose for His coming to earth. Our Lord Jesus demonstrated that time and time again with His compassionate miracles; like casting out unclean spirits and healing the sick. Most of all Jesus showed that His purpose for coming was to make these and all people clean by completing His mission of going to the cross and laying down His life as the perfect, cleansing sacrifice for us all. For all those times we put our own standards above His.

Through His words in our reading today, Jesus draws our attention away from human traditions, which cannot save us, to focus on God's Word, which **alone** can save us. God's words of Law, spoken to us and for us, expose the "dirt behind our ears," the "dirt" we've been hiding in the hope no one would see, the "dirt" that gets in our eyes and blinds us to the needs of those around us, the "dirt" that clogs our hearts and shuts them down, the "dirt" that kills. But the point of all this is not so God can say, "Look, you're dirty!" Rather, through His cleansing, soothing words of Gospel Jesus calls us from human tradition to God's Word and His priorities. This He does by letting His voice declare us clean.

By His death on the cross Jesus says to you, "Come to me, and I *will* make you clean." In your Baptism, Jesus applied to you personally that heart-cleansing forgiveness of sins He bled and died to earn for you. When you receive the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion, Jesus is again calling out to you and delivering to you personally the forgiving cleansing power of His crucified, risen, and ascended body and blood and makes your heart clean. And this day also through, the words of absolution Jesus has declared your heart to be clean: "You are forgiven all your sins in the

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, clean hands are important in our world, but much more important is the fact are that our hearts have been made clean in the sight of God. And through His Word and Sacraments Jesus Christ has told you personally that you **are** clean, truly clean. Now and forever clean! Amen