

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 defiled hands?’ He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

“This people honours 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.’

Sermon

“**I have washed my hands**”. This was the message printed on the t shirt of a walker I passed the other morning. It made me smile! **I have washed my hands! Good for him!** We could all wear such a message, couldn't we? In these pandemic times we have re-learned the importance of washing our hands. The scribes and Pharisees would have worn this t-shirt message in huge letters ---they had washed their hands, for different reasons! But the disciples of Jesus and hand washing?...not so much from the sounds of this morning's Gospel.

These days washing our hands, wearing face masks and social distancing have huge importance in preventing the spread of the COVID 19 virus, even now we have vaccines. Since we have taken hand washing extra seriously, there has been a great reduction in the sale of cold and cough medications so it works! Washing of hands and utensils for the Scribes and Pharisees was a ritual, a practice, a rule, but for them, nothing to do with germs and disease prevention.

Jesus had a different priority. He quotes Isaiah

“This people honours 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.’

Hypocrites he called the scribes and Pharisees...actors, acting righteous but abandoning God.

It is unusual that the Pharisees and scribes have come a long way **from** Jerusalem to gather around our Lord. Usually it's the other way around...pilgrims are drawn **to** Jerusalem, to the temple, the spiritual centre of their faith. That's where the scribes and Pharisees resided. The intentions of the scribes and Pharisees are not good. Earlier in this Gospel of Mark, we learn that the scribes think Jesus is demonic. The Pharisees have begun a conspiracy to kill him.

The Pharisees have ignored compelling evidence of Jesus' amazing power to do good. Wherever he went, ...they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; ...and it is written that...

...all who touched it were healed.” All who touched even the fringe of his cloak were healed. Isn't this in itself startling?

Possibly threatened by Jesus, the Pharisees focus on the rules not being observed, thereby missing the point! The church today can be similarly distracted from its core ministry. Celebrating God's saving love, God's forgiveness and inviting us into relationship with God,

that is what we are about. Instead, we in the church can get caught in controversies about issues that seem very important but which are not really important...for example which prayer book to use...there are others.

The Pharisees were not entirely bad. They believed that strictly following the rules brought people closer to our Lord God. It was the Pharisees' desire to obey God that made them draw up rules over the years to make the law in the Scriptures called Torah easier to follow. This became known as 'the tradition of the elders'. At first 'the tradition of the elders' was passed on by word of mouth...but later, after Jesus' time, it was written down and called the 'Mishnah'. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees accepted the oral 'tradition of the elders' as **equally** important as the Torah, the divinely inspired scriptures. By regarding this man-made law as equal to scripture, they lost sight of the difference between God's law and their opinion and that was their downfall.

Jesus says their hearts are far from him and it is our hearts that our Lord most wants. He wants us to be close to him. He wants us to recognize human traditions as something separate...but attachment to our traditions is very human and very tempting. Here is a little story about tradition:

There was a guru who had meditation services every evening and his cat would always run in the middle of the meditators. So every evening before the service, the guru tied the cat to the tree outside. Then the guru died and the new guru also had the cat tied to the tree every evening in the same way. When the cat died, the new guru had an assistant immediately go out and buy a new cat to tie to the tree in the same way. The new guru even wrote a manual on the correct way to tie the cat to the tree before meditation services.

This story is credited to Anthony deMello, a Jesuit priest and mystic who died. What are our cats that we are still tying to trees? practices whose origins are forgotten, practices which turn our attention from what is important. I think of one practice or tradition now abandoned in many churches and that is the practice of women coming to church with heads covered. For years this was followed...because there is a verse in the Bible which states it. Bare-headed little girls in past times, were waved away at the church door by the admonishing finger of the Rector. Women on the altar guild covered their heads, even when preparing for services sometimes with a tissue.

The church and we struggle to know God's will. What is God's word on unequal distribution of wealth in the world? On climate change? affordable housing? sweatshops employing children? On gender issues? vaccines...and a host of other issues? People of faith find themselves in opposition to other people of faith over such issues. How do we determine God's will in these matters? The Pharisees in their own way were trying to solve these problems.

King David sinned greatly when it came to Bethsheba, having orchestrating her husband's death in battle. Where did David find hope as he confessed? He wrote, "Cleanse me with hyssop, and

I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.” Hyssop was a small, brush-like plant in Israel. It’s mentioned in connection with the Passover; the Israelites used it to spread blood on the doorframes of their homes ([Exodus 12:21-22](#)). Later it was used to sprinkle blood on the tabernacle to dedicate it to God and on people with skin diseases so that they would be cleansed. Hyssop, blood, cleansing, and forgiveness all go together in the Bible, and David’s plea to be cleansed with hyssop was like saying, “Wash me with blood, and I will be forgiven.”

Psalm 51 says

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.

We say this every Lent.

In Ezekiel (36:25) it is written:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.

Jesus is our hope for being made clean. When we confess our sins and are washed in his blood, and the waters of baptism we are made clean. No sin sticks to people who live in Christ.

So back to the t-shirts. What would we want on our t-shirts today? Here is one:

Clean hands

And

Clean heart. Amen.

I have washed my hands.

I have washed my hands as a priest.

WE have washed out hands.

Results – reduction in sale of cold/cough medicines.

Beautiful inside and out.

Where did David find hope as he confessed? He wrote, “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.” Hyssop was a small, brush-like plant in Israel. It’s mentioned in connection with the Passover; the Israelites used it to spread blood on the doorframes of their homes ([Exodus 12:21-22](#)). Later it was used to sprinkle blood on the tabernacle to dedicate it to God and on people with skin diseases so that they would be cleansed. Hyssop, blood, cleansing, and forgiveness all go together in the Bible, and David’s plea to be cleansed with hyssop was like saying, “Wash me with blood, and I will be forgiven.”

The blood of Jesus is our hope of forgiveness. When we confess our sins and are washed in the blood of Jesus, we are made clean. No sin sticks to people who trust in Christ. Confess your sins and believe in him today.

Prayer

Lord God, thank you that there is complete cleansing for us in the blood of Jesus. We confess our need for forgiveness, and we trust in the finished work of Christ. Amen.

Psalm 51:10

Create in me a clean heart, O God,

And renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Source: <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Being-Cleansed-From-Sin>

Ezekiel 36:25

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.

Jeremiah 33:8

I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned against Me and by which they have transgressed against Me.**Source:**

<https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Being-Cleansed-From-Sin>