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August 29, 2021

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

CLEAN LIVING

Don't tell the children about what we just read from the Gospel of Mark! I have looked at a lot of children's bible story books over the years. Never have I seen the account about not washing hands included in any of them. In the midst of a pandemic, we don't need to give children scriptural ammunition to use as an argument against hand washing. When I was a kid, I sometimes tried to go from playing football or basketball outside directly to the dinner table when called without washing my hands. Shocking, right? Had I been a better bible student back then, I could have told my parents that Jesus defended his foul-fingered friends, and then I would have reminded them that Pontius Pilate, the very one who sentenced Jesus to death, was the person who washed his hands of the deed. They didn't want me to be like Pilate, always washing my hands, did they? Of course, that would have been poor use of scriptural authority and even worse strategy for dealing with my parents. I would tell children not to try to pull such a stunt. The Center for Disease Control, the National Institutes of Health, and the American Academy of Pediatrics would all stand against that kind of reasoning.

So, what would we tell the children about what we just heard in the bible story? Why did Jesus defend his dirty dozen? First let's be clear that the issue in the scripture passage was not about getting rid of germs before eating. The Pharisees and scribes who brought this criticism of his followers to Jesus had started out as groups that had a goal of helping the Jewish people maintain their Jewish identity to enhance their relationship with God at a time when Roman and other Gentile people were having a greater impact on Jewish practices. These religious leaders strongly emphasized Sabbath observance as well as the part of the Hebrew law concerning diet, and they enhanced what was found in scripture about purity practices.

However, what started out with the good intent of drawing the people of God closer together, ended up having the effect of defining who was 'in' and who was 'out,'

judging who had and who could have a good relationship with God. Their oral tradition with all of its extensive rules about ritual purity got used as a yardstick to measure who was disciplined and good, but then that so-called yardstick got used to whack the knuckles of those who did not measure up to their standards. These religious leaders believed that a primary path toward holiness consisted of separating oneself from anything or anyone not considered pure, by their definition of pure. The regulations and practices over time primarily became a way to keep those whom they considered ‘outsiders’ out.

We do want our children to know that there were rituals that Jesus practiced that do reflect who God is, and that is a good measure for our spiritual rituals. Many of those spiritual practices were founded in his Jewish identity. Jesus most definitely understood the God he worshiped and served as a forgiving and gathering God, not as a harsh and excluding God. Where the absolute focus on purity rituals led some of the religious leaders of his day was not where Jesus wanted to go. So instead of joining in the criticizing of his followers, he points out that if the goal of the religious leaders was to seek purity, then they needed to take a look in the mirror. Any measuring of where we are in our relationship with God has to take into account our words, our actions, and our hearts.

Jesus then tells the crowd that which keeps us from true godliness is not some group trying to impose their way upon us, but our own wayward hearts trying to impose their way upon us. That’s where our evil intentions reside. Our hearts need to get cleaned up even more than our hands, Jesus was saying. We, ourselves, can clean up our hands and other parts of our bodies, but we need God’s help to cleanse our hearts, our internal selves. Such a focus on allowing God to do what God can do, allowed Jesus to pursue what God was calling him to do. It freed him up to not worry so much about ritual purity when he encountered someone who was sick. He went ahead and touched them and healed them – something the purity traditions would not allow. Jesus wanted to connect with people who were demonized by some event or spirit so they could be liberated from what was oppressing them. He broke bread with Gentiles and other outsiders. These contacts with such people were considered by some of the religious leaders as that which could defile him.

But Jesus worried less about being defiled by not following a long list of purity procedures so he could focus more on being defined by having his heart reflect the generosity, healing, and welcoming nature of God's heart. Even so, he warned that actions and intentions and attitudes that come out of our hearts could also keep us from reflecting God's heart. He lists sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly as being evidence of having a dirty heart, all of which were of greater consequence than having hands that were less than immaculate.

I have heard musicians who play all the right notes, who play everything technically clean, who play correctly all the notes in front of them, but their hearts are not in what they are doing. They are playing music without any music flowing from their hearts and that is a vital thing missing. And then there are musicians, who connect the passion and the tune that the composer was trying to convey, whose hearts overflow with a musicality that makes other people's hearts soar. Jesus invites and enables us to put our whole hearts into our living, to seek our needed purity from the God who made our hearts, the God who gave us our purpose for living, and allow those heart-shaped lives to soar so that others get caught up in the heavenly music that can lift everyone.

One of our rituals that has cleansing imagery is baptism. When we baptize children, it is not just the parents who take the vows promising to show the love of God to each child. In Presbyterian practice, we as a congregation take that same vow as do the parents. So that guides us in what to tell the children. We can tell them that clean hands are important for physical health. But showing them that having hands stained by generous acts of kindness, or through feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, lifting the fallen to their feet, and comforting all who are broken is vital for our and their spiritual health. Such acts would be indication of us not just having clean hearts, but of having hearts that are shaped by the One who inspired all the heavenly music that has ever been written or played. Jesus lived out such a life as a masterpiece. We may never be so accomplished in our style of living, but Jesus does invite us to put our whole hearts into it and that's what the children should see. And when we do, oh how God's very heart will sing, and that will be the heavenly music all of us of whatever age will want to hear and live by!

