

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost
August 29, 2021
Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark.

¹Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around [Jesus], ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and 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.) ⁵So 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?” ⁶He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

You may have noticed that I wasn't here last weekend. I was celebrating the marriage of my son, Matt and his new wife, Callie. After 10 years of dating, 3 of which were long distance, after finishing college, changing jobs, getting a Master's, buying a house and getting a dog, finally-- a wedding.



Still, with all that time of planning, it was not an easy task. They delayed for a year because of COVID. This summer their church was under construction so they couldn't have the wedding there. Their printer sent them materials for someone else's wedding. And, well, Delta happened, so people stayed home. None of the

grandparents, and many of the aunts and cousins could not travel. But the couple pivoted, got creative, and still had a glorious wedding.

Having now experienced 2 children's "COVID" weddings – I'm more convinced than ever that the heart of a wedding is a promise of faithfulness made before God and other people. Everything else is extra – the dress, the pictures, the party. A wedding is a promise of faithfulness made before God and community. That's the heart of it.

And it's that "getting to heart of things" that Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel. We hear the argument about washing hands and think, "Is Jesus telling me to not wash my hands?" This week someone asked me, "How are you going to preach on this in the midst of COVID – You need to tell people they should wash their hands – We're in a global pandemic!"



Not going to tell you not to wash your hands. This goes deeper than soap and water. But I do have to say, the argument in the gospel sounds a bit like the arguments we've been hearing for a year now, don't they? "Have you washed your hands? You need to be wearing a mask! Why haven't you gotten a vaccine?" vs. "I need to choose what's best for me. I don't trust all this. I'm not at risk." Both sides hate each other, and none of us is touching the heart of the issue.

Look at what was happening in Jesus' day. The pharisees called out the disciples for not washing their hands. But it had nothing to do with germs. Germs weren't invented until 1676. For these religious leaders it was all about the kind of world they were trying to create. They had read over and over in the scriptures, "Be holy as God is holy," "walk in the way of righteousness" and "Delight in the law of the Lord."



So, they were trying to create a holy, orderly world; a world where you knew what was right and wrong and could always seek the right. You knew your place in the world. You could strive to be holy as God is holy. These were not foolish or evil people. They honestly wanted to live pure and Godly lives and help others do so as well.

The hard part about the righteousness of the Pharisees is that to be "holy" was hard for some and impossible for others. Whole groups of people were automatically excluded as other – unholy – like foreigners, the disabled, the chronically ill, and to some extent, women. Then there were those who were unholy or impure because of their jobs – shepherds for instance. The poor were often excluded because they didn't have the tithes and offerings to give. This pure and holy world was very much about us and "those people" – the un-religious -- the outcasts -- the sinners.

Which leads me to ask, “How do we order our world today? Who are the impure? Who is good and who is bad? Who do we listen to and who do we write off? Who do we admire and who do we shame? Who is holy – who are the sinners?”



Into his world and ours, Jesus brings a different way of reading the scriptures. Instead of emphasizing “Be holy as God is holy,” instead of a quest to be set apart and pure Jesus taught that God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness.” Jesus didn’t focus on holiness – he focused on



compassion. Now, to be clear, he wasn’t rejecting the law or holiness – He saw something more behind them. Something more central. Jesus says, “Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God...[you should be doing both]” He says, “Blessed are the pure... in heart.” And at one point he comes right out and says, “Be compassionate as God is compassionate.”

Jesus didn’t just talk about being compassionate. He lived it. In a world where people judged others pure or impure, Jesus acted out of compassion. He touched lepers and hemorrhaging women. He entered a graveyard where a man with a “legion” of unclean spirits lived. He had a long conversation with a foreign woman. And most telling, he ate with both the holy and the outcasts. Kind of like a teen walking into a high school cafeteria, and sitting with the person who most needs a friend -- every day.

Jesus’ conversation with the Pharisees wasn’t about washing hands. It was about two different ways of seeing the world, of building society. Can we as followers of Christ choose a society grounded in mercy. Can we try to be the image of a loving God in this world. Can we base our everyday decisions on grace and compassion? Can we define others not as holy or unholy, in or out, but as beloved? Can we think in terms of a community of caring instead of a community of judgement?



And whoa, will that be messy and hard and confusing! One thing about pharisaic ordered lives with clear roles and rules – there’s not a lot of questions. good/bad – right/wrong – included/ excluded. Compassion is messy and unclear. We will make mistakes. We won’t always know the best way to be compassionate. We will want to judge people not like us. We will be opposed by those who see the world differently.

But we are blessed with a God of loving faithfulness. We are blessed with the power of the risen Christ. We are blessed with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In prayer, self-examination and an ongoing, living relationship with God, we will find our way. We will

live into – grow into being the image of a loving God. Over time we will learn to be compassionate, slow to anger, faithful and loving.

In these days of so much dissension and anger, so much fear and blaming, I pray daily for the Spirit to show us the way to love, the way to create a better world. I invite you to do the same. Our faith is not about whether we wash our hands, or how we worship – it is about following Christ in the way of compassion and giving the gift of God's loving care to our community. May that be the heart of things for us this week. Amen.