

XIII Pentecost (17b)

Mk 7.1-23

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Fr. Dow Sanderson

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It is a most unusual story.

Jesus and his little band of followers are being watched ever so carefully. The Scribes and the Pharisees are more than eager to find fault.

And apparently, they even have spies at the lavatory.

*Aha! Some of your disciples did not wash their hands before they sat down to eat!*

Interesting that they did not accuse Jesus himself of this little breach of etiquette. Perhaps his mother had taught him better. But the disciples apparently were rough hewn men for whom little stood between hunger and that first bite of fried chicken. I can certainly relate to that.

The second thing to note is that it really wasn't true that the *Pharisees and ALL the Jews* did not eat unless they washed their hands, as the little editorial note in Mark's Gospel would have us believe. That is something of an exaggeration. Just as today, it would be an exaggeration to say that *ALL Christians go to church every Sunday...or All Episcopalians are Anglo-Catholics*. Just because something is desirable does not make it universal.

And thirdly, we must note that this little scandal is not about hygiene. For all we know, the disciples might have had the cleanest hands in the middle east. And even if they didn't, as long as they were not serving us food, why should we, or anybody care?

No, this was not an example of the Health Department looking for violations in the restaurant code... this is a matter of liturgical fastidiousness.

It would have been as much about HOW hands were washed as the deed itself.

We heard in our first lesson this morning the wonderful verse: *Surely this is a great nation, with wise and understanding people, for what nation has laws and ordinances as righteous as all this law.*

Yes, the law is a good thing... principally because by the commandments, which we attempt to keep and fail, we are taught to be dependent upon God's grace.

But the observance of a law in time of prosperity and ease is a very different thing from the observance of a law when those who seek to be observant are in the minority... when their ways and customs are not understood by the prevailing culture, there is the tendency to circle the wagons... to panic just a little... to draw the reins a little tighter... and to be a little less forgiving.

Just this past week, I got an e-mail from a good friend announcing a program of the Christian/Jewish Council of Charleston. It is to be held across the street at the Rutledge Avenue

Synagogue, and will indeed be a fine opportunity. But at the end of the letter, which was a warm and generous invitation was this little epilogue: *Please be reminded that in Orthodox Judaism, women may not shake the Rabbi's hand, nor even touch him.*

Well, I just couldn't help myself. I shot back an e-mail responding that we would bring a large and enthusiastic crowd from our parish... and in spite of their fallen nature and base impulses, we would do everything possible to insure that the womenfolk of Church of the Holy Communion kept their hands to themselves!

Now, we can smile and chuckle at quaint and sweet little traditions...

But I am certain that no Anglo-Catholic has ever visited another parish with liturgical scorecard in hand...

*Mercy, they censured the deacon with three swings of the thurible instead of two!*

*And did you see that hideous chasuble? Not a natural fiber to be found!*

So yes, we have some good friends over in the Pharisee camp... and they look remarkably like us.

When tradition is under assault, it is a natural thing to over-react, because the intention is to preserve something that is holy and good and gracious.

But Jesus reminds us that before we can take offence at a violation of ritual purity, we need first look at our spiritual purity.

In typical lectionary fashion... some of the best verses in the scripture are eliminated from today's Gospel. We get a very edited version of the response Jesus makes to the Pharisees.

Right after he calls them hypocrites, in the full version of the Gospel, he tells them why!

*You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.*

And then he goes on to describe a famous and apparently popular little loophole. The commandment *Honor thy Father and Mother* was commonly understood to mean that, as parents aged, children had a responsibility to care for their health and financial well-being. But apparently, with a little assistance from the clergy, a man could designate a portion of his income to the Temple. It was called *Corban*. And apparently, unlike a six month certificate of deposit, there was quite a bit of liquidity... In other words, it was restricted in name only.

But it did offer a fine excuse. When one's parents got a little weak in the knees, a son could say, *Sorry about it Pop, but I can't help you out this week. Paid my tithe early, don't you know. Saving up for treasure in heaven.*

All of this to say, really, it doesn't matter how we wash our hands, or whether we keep our rabbis untainted by the wiles of women... or whether the incense is hypoallergenic...

All of our most scrupulous religiosity is for naught if we do not seek first to love God with our heart, mind and soul and our neighbor as ourselves..

Indeed, it is not what goes into a man that defiles him, but what comes out.

Let me close with one more story.

Several years ago, we hosted a clericus meeting a Church of the Holy Communion. I was in the kitchen talking to one of the most austere and Calvinistic clergymen who at that time was serving in our diocese. The man, I am sure, had never smiled in his life.

And as we were having this serious, dour, and may I say *painful* conversation, in bopped Father Dan. Typically, he had to push the door open with his foot, because he had a cheeseburger in one hand, and a sixteen ounce coke in the other.

Seeing the solemn-faced presbyter slumped against the refrigerator, Father Dan exclaimed with real joy and merriment in his voice, *Well hello, Father, however are you.*

*Better than I deserve, being the sinner that I am,* came his sincere response.

Silence followed, as Fr. Dan the joyful, and Father John Calvin stared blankly and uncomprehendingly one at the other.

The point of this, my brothers and sisters is that the Gospel sets us free to live joyfully. I hesitate to say , *Would to God that everyone was just like Dan...* but I do mean something like that.

If we walk around in gloom, fastidiously clinging to religiosity, but not to living life to the fullest, then we are living life wrongly.

In an article, I read this week, the author was comparing Calvinists and Catholics.

The Calvinists apologizes for his sin and says, *but after all, I am only human.*

The Catholic replies, *Man, what more do you want! You were created in God's image. Just a little lower than the angels and crowned with honor and glory!*

In other words, we don't need to apologize for being "only" human, we ought to rejoice that, by God's grace, we are becoming fully human!

This morning, we have the joy of bringing Gianna Marie Turoto to the waters of Baptism. As she is sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ's own forever, may we all rejoice that God in Christ has breathed in each of us the new life of the Holy Spirit. May we see this life as the wonderful gift and treasure that it is... and may we indeed go forth from this place rejoicing... in the power of that same Spirit.

+++Amen