

Pentecost 14 / August 29, 2021

Mark 7:14-15

“Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.”

Are you clean? Did you wash your hands before you ate breakfast? Did you sanitize your hands when you entered the building? What makes a person clean or unclean? Uncleanliness like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. To a person with an all-terrain vehicle, a mud hole is the cleanest place on earth! But to the person who does the laundry or cleans the carpets, those dirty pants and muddy boots are the epitome of filth. Are you clean? In the world today no one is clean. Masks and hand sanitizer are a must even for the fully vaccinated. Not even the fully vaccinated are presumed clean and must under go a test to make sure. Even at that the suspicion of uncleanliness lingers.

In last weeks reading from Mark, the Pharisees tried to lay a guilt trip on Jesus for allowing His disciples to eat without washing their hands. What was wrong with that? Do you wash your hands before eating? Its standard hygiene to wash our hands before we eat. I learned a lot in kindergarten, but I'm sure my mother had already taught me to wash my hands. The ancients didn't have the same understanding of microbiology as we do, but they were smart enough to wash the dirt off their hands before they ate. They washed their feet when they entered a home. This was a different kind of washing. It had nothing to do with bacteria and viruses. It had to do with people preparing themselves to encounter God.

Do you encounter God when you eat a meal? In fact, we do. God comes to us through the food we eat, to strengthen our bodies and to preserve our lives in the world. The Psalmist sang, “You cause grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart.” We acknowledge God's gifts and His presence, by saying grace. Do you remember to give thanks before every meal? The people in Jesus' day gave thanks by washing their hands. It was a ritual to prepare their hearts for a sacred encounter with God in their daily bread. Then why didn't Jesus make His disciples wash their hands and prepare their hearts to encounter God in their meal? The ritual didn't prepare their hearts as much as it reminded them of what was already in their hearts; God' grace in love and forgiveness. Jesus' disciples' hearts were already prepared to receive with thankfulness God's bounty from the earth, whether they washed their hands or not. Jesus had cleansed them. We say grace to remember Jesus, His cleansing and the gifts God give us through Him. Whether or not we wash our hands and say grace, Jesus cleanses us!

The point of the ritual was not to cleanse the hands of bacteria, although it certainly had that effect. The point of the ritual was not to cleanse the person from sin either, God does that. The point of the ritual was to remind the people of God's kindness, in cleansing them of sin through forgiveness and in providing them with nourishment for their bodies, through the produce of the earth. We don't wash our hands for the same reason they did, but we give thanks to God through our own rituals; be it making the sign of the holy cross to remind us of our baptism, or by saying grace before a meal.

These rituals do not cleanse us. We are no better or worse for doing them in and of themselves. However, we will be worse off, if we believe that their performance makes us better people, more spiritual than others, less sinful. That's what the Pharisees thought. That's why they were so zealous for their rituals. They thought their rituals made them better people, more spiritual than others. These rituals are important to remind us of the cleansing God gives our hearts through Jesus Christ, whom He gave to be our Saviour. Jesus cleanses us!

We make the sign of the Holy Cross to remind us of our baptism. Our baptism reminds of our sin and our Saviour. We are sinners. We were baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. We make the sign of the Holy Cross to remind ourselves of the forgiveness Jesus gives and promises to us, as often as we confess our sin and come to Him for grace. Do you have to make the sign of the Holy Cross to receive forgiveness? Of course not. The ritual is a means to remind us Jesus is our great high priest, who atoned for our sin. We make the sign of the Holy Cross to remember that we can come to Him to receive mercy and grace to help in time of need. We remember our baptism, not for the sake of the ritual, which we may not even remember. We remember our baptism for the sake of the promise of forgiveness and the cleansing from sin God give us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Sin defiles us. Jesus cleanses us!

The people of ancient Israel had many rituals, festivals and other religious practices. They were to observe these, not to make themselves clean from sin, but to remember God's love and promise of forgiveness. God made them clean! God had already made them His people through the covenant He made through Moses. God testified to the forgiveness of their sin, by the blood of the animals sacrificed in the temple. These sacrifices didn't take away sin in themselves. Rather they pointed to the sacrifice Jesus would make on the cross, which would truly take away sin. Only God can cleanse us of sin! God cleanses us through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross! In his first letter, St. John wrote, "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin." Jesus cleanses us from the inside out!

Religious rituals are meant to remind us of our sin and lead us to our Saviour. In the letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul said that we are by nature children of wrath. Isaiah said that in the presence of God we are all unclean. He said that in comparison to God's righteousness, our most righteous acts are like filthy rags. We need to be cleansed of sin to stand in the presence of God! Religious rituals, such as the washing of hands, saying grace and making the sign of the Holy Cross, remind us most importantly of God's forgiveness and the cleansing we receive through Jesus' blood and righteousness. Wash the dirt from your hands before you eat. Remember Jesus washes your heart in forgiveness of your sins.

We need rituals, whether it is the washing of hands, saying grace before we eat, saying our prayers before we go to sleep, or making the sign of the Holy Cross. We need rituals to remind us of our need to come to Jesus for the cleansing of forgiveness, the healing of our spirits and for power to live clean lives according to His righteousness. Every ritual, even saying grace and making the sign of the Holy Cross, can degenerate into superstition, if we believe that punishment will come if we forget, or that blessing comes because we did it. Rituals degenerate into self-righteousness, if we think doing them makes us better than other people. Rituals remind us we are sinners and that we need a Saviour. Rituals remind us that in Jesus we have a Saviour.

Jesus Christ has come into the world. He has atoned for sin through His sinless life and sacrificial death. In Him there is forgiveness. Jesus Christ comes into our hearts and cleanses our spirits through the word and by the working of the Holy Spirit, in the washing of Holy Baptism. He fills us with His Spirit that we might resist the sinfulness that remains within us. When we fail and fall, He lifts us up. When we doubt and are tempted to despair, He blesses us with faith to come to Him for forgiveness. We make the sign of the Holy Cross, not to be blessed. We make the sign of the Holy Cross because we are blessed.

We say grace to give thanks to God for the food we eat, which He graciously gives us to strengthen our bodies and preserve our lives in the world. We receive our daily bread as a reminder of Jesus, the living bread who gives life to our spirits through His flesh, which He offered on the cross for the life of the world. We say grace to remember that Jesus, who nourishes our bodies through the bread of the earth, nourishes our spirits with His body and blood in Holy Communion, given and shed for the forgiveness of our sin. We say grace to remember that He is the living bread from heaven, which a person may eat through faith and have eternal life. We make the sign of the Holy Cross to remember the cleansing of His death to sin and the promise of rising to in Him to new and eternal life without sin. Sin defiles. Jesus cleanses!

What makes a person clean, or unclean before God? Sin makes all of us unclean before God and unable to stand in his presence. Who and what will deliver us from our uncleanness? Jesus makes us clean to stand in the presence of God. Thanks be to God for Christ Jesus our Saviour. As Paul said in the letter to the Corinthians, "God made Him who had no sin to be a sin offering that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." He cleanses our whole spirit; body and soul! Jesus is the most powerful cleaner. He cleanses us of sin and makes us righteous to stand in the presence of God now through faith, but one day, fully and forever in His resurrection to a new life without anything that will make us unclean. Sin defiles, but Jesus cleanses all who receive Him through faith; all whom He washes in Holy Baptism; All whom He nourishes with His Holy Body and precious blood in communion. In Jesus' Name. Amen