



SAINT JAMES'
EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Fremont, California

SERMON

30. August, 2009. Pentecost 13

Title: "Hand Washing . . . and Other Things"

Text: St. Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

J.J.



In preparing sermons, I usually give the sermon a title, in order to capture the point of the sermon. Here, at St. James', we do not publish sermon titles in our "Green Pages," but I do include the title when posting a sermon on our website. Today's sermon is titled: "*Hand Washing . . . and Other Things.*" When you look at today's Gospel, you might think it's all about "Hand Washing" (and in some ways it is), but this morning, I want to encourage us to pay attention to the "Other Things" . . . the less obvious and more subtle meaning of the text.

Indeed, hand washing is very important. With the recent threat of the H1N1 virus, we have once again come to realize its importance. Hand washing is so important, there is even a special day set aside for washing hands, October 15, the Global Hand Washing Day. And just how long should one take to wash one's hands?

(This is not a rhetorical question). 20 seconds! Do you know how long that really is? [DEMONSTRATE HAND WASHING FOR 20 SECONDS—COUNT]. It's a long time. Children are told to sing "Happy Birthday" twice. In our family, we sing: "Row, Row Your Boat." The washing of hands is not a recent custom. It goes back through history, and not just for health reasons, but also for symbolic reasons. The old saying—"I wash my hands of this"—is attributed to Pontius Pilate (Matthew 27) when Pilate, washes his hands of the decision to crucify Jesus, and declares: "I am innocent of the blood of this just person." Symbolic or ritual hand washing is also a part of many religious traditions, including the Bahá'í Faith, Hinduism, Islam, Shintō, and Christianity (e.g. the use of the Lavabo before celebrating the Eucharist, as we do here at St. James'). And, it was (and still is) a very important part of the Jewish tradition.

So . . . when we hear the comments made by the Pharisees, like in today's Gospel, we need to be very, very careful. We can easily get the idea that they were acting just a little bit silly, making such a fuss over the disciples neglecting to wash their hands before eating. We need to remember, the Pharisees were really good people, and not the curmudgeons we often make them out to be. Truth be told, we would probably like at least five or six of them as members here at St. James': They prayed often, worshipped every day, kept Sabbath, tithed, and volunteered for everything. In other words, they were good church people.

And this whole business of washing hands, as highlighted in today's Gospel, was a tradition that went all the way back to the Book of Exodus, where the high priest was instructed to ritually wash both his hands and his feet before he performed any religious rite. Over the years, it had become the norm not just for the priest, but for anyone who wanted to observe the Torah, that is to keep the Law. And indeed the Pharisees did want to do that! For them, to wash one's hands before eating was a way to identify with the high priest, and to sanctify, to make holy, to make special the common act of eating a meal. In many ways, they were sort of following the idea of the "priesthood of all believers," that is, following the example of the high priest. In our day, we do something similar every time we pray before eating a meal. We give thanks to God for giving us the food and ask God to bless the food. Understanding their practice in this light, we might find it a little more difficult to fault the Pharisees for criticizing the disciples about not washing their hands before eating . . . not unlike us, wondering why a group that calls itself Christian, does not say grace before a meal.

But Jesus does fault the Pharisees! He points out the tremendous gap that had developed between their external religious practices and their internal beliefs. The Pharisees had concentrated so much on ritual, that they had forgotten all about their faith. (And I must add a warning here for us Episcopalians: we ourselves can easily focus on outward ritual, and forget all about what's in the heart . . . I know I can). You see, when one focuses on the outward signs and rituals, one can easily lose sight of what is really going on. Although washing hands had begun for the Pharisees in all sincerity, by Jesus' time a certain "fear" factor had set in. Everything they did hinged on their "fear" of breaking a law. And their fear was this: if one part of the law were to be

broken, then, who knows, the whole tradition could be lost and if the tradition were lost, then Judaism itself could die out.

Fear does that to people. Fear can turn minor concerns into obsessions. And that is also true for us: fear can, and often does, delude and control us. There are times when we are afraid that if our tried and proven ways of doing things should change, then we are setting ourselves up for failure, and that is true in our Church, in our Country, in our jobs, in our communities, in our homes. Take, for example the present debates (or should we call them shouting matches) about a national health plan for this country and our fears about it . . . or the debates starting again within the Anglican Communion over the actions we took at our last General Convention (some fear that the Anglican Church is falling apart) . . . or the closing the NUMMI Plant here in Fremont (we fear our economy will collapse) . . . or even here at St. James', our fears during this transition time (Are we doing it properly? And will we get the right Rector?). Fear can and does distort reality so that the important concerns of our life are often missed. In short, fear distorts the truth.

It is to those fears that Jesus speaks to us in today's Gospel. Jesus knows that fear can be a paralyzing power, but he also knows there's a way out of that, and that is the way of freedom. Freedom is the opposite of fear. It was the freedom of Jesus that so troubled the Pharisees, a freedom that allowed Jesus to blatantly disregard the tradition of the elders (like not washing his hands). But it was that very freedom that also drew all kinds of people to Jesus. It was that freedom of Jesus that enabled Jesus to accept those who were different: the outcasts, the unclean. Jesus was free not to be scared of society or of his enemies, but to speak truth to them in love. And it is that freedom of Jesus, that can enable you and me to look at ourselves, openly and honestly, to recognize the fears that often fill our lives (and we have more than our share of them), but then, to embrace that freedom which enables us to accept the mercy of Jesus Christ . . . which enables all of us to love ourselves and to love one another, even as Jesus loves us.

And you know, when we discover that kind of freedom . . . when our hearts are made free in Christ . . . then, we too, will discover that all of life is sanctified. Ordinary things are made clean. Common things become holy. Everyday life becomes precious . . . not by the ritual washing of our hands . . . or by saying our table prayers at every meal . . . no . . . but by seeing those common events and ordinary people in a new way. And that new way is through the eyes of Jesus. Jesus freely accepted the outcast, the lonely, the unclean, the guilty . . . he accepted the common things and broken things of this world . . . And, He accepts you and me. Jesus was not afraid to get dirty, to brush against and touch the unclean things of this world. That's what made him holy. And Jesus invites you and me, to touch the unclean and the brokenness in ourselves and in the lives of those around us . . . and to reach out and touch others with the freedom and love of Jesus Christ. Then, we shall indeed be made holy! Amen.

S.D.G.

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