

*Getting Your Hands Dirty*

Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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“... *the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be hard and dead as stone when we get it.*” Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*

## **Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

7 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, <sup>2</sup>they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. <sup>3</sup>(For the tradition was not to eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; <sup>4</sup>and 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.) <sup>5</sup>So 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?’ <sup>6</sup>He 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; <sup>7</sup>in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” <sup>8</sup>You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup>there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’ <sup>21</sup>For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup>adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’

Sing with me ...

*Spirit of the living God, fall a-fresh on me;*

*Spirit of the living God, fall a-fresh on me;*

*Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me;*

*Spirit of the living God, fall a-fresh on me.*

*“Fill me, use me.”*

Our tradition is full of references to this connection between heart and hand – about the connection between intention and action.

As Melissa sang for us this morning, even when our hands are raised in prayer, “the honest cries of breaking hearts are better than a Hallelujah” sometimes. All those pious hands folded in prayer or raised in praise are no better than the honest cries of breaking hearts.

When folks were sick in the early church, the leaders were instructed to go lay hands on them, not because something magical was going to happen but because the laying on of hands focused the attention and the intention of their hearts.

When we ordain people we do this ancient ritual of the “laying on of hands.” That happened to me 34 years ago last week. What I remember is the weight of all those hands and thinking, “My God, what have I got myself into? Is this what ministry means, to carry all this burden alone?”

In the years since then, I’ve come to believe that a better ritual for ordination is holding hands – the ministry we are called to do together is not a matter of one person carrying all the weight. It’s not some magical transference of power. It’s the promise we make to one another to focus our attention and our intention to hold each other up in whatever it is we are called to do.

So, as Dr. King taught us to do when we work together to do the work of justice and love and peace and things get hard and we want to quit, we hold hands and sing ...

*Precious Lord, take my hand;  
Lead me on, help me stand.  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.  
Through the storm, through the night,  
Lead me on to the light;  
Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.*

What we have learned from our ancestors and from each other is that there is a connection between hearts and hands.

And because our hands are one of the ways we touch the world, our tradition is also concerned about just how clean those hands are.

Harriet read for us this morning that Psalm that asks: “Who shall ascend to the holy hills?” And the answer is: “All who have clean hands and pure hearts.”

And, as the story from today seems to indicate, *clean* hands are not necessarily the same thing as *washed* hands.

I’m thinking of that dramatic scene when Pilate has the authority to release Jesus or to execute him and when, under the pressure of the crowd he sentences Jesus to death, he calls for a bowl of water and he washes his hands of the whole thing.

Pilate may have washed hands but they are far from clean.

So, by the time we get to this story in Mark 7, there is a fair amount of anxiety about the difference.

It’s completely possible, Jesus says, that acts of ritual purity can be a smokescreen for the real intentions – the honest cries – of the heart.

When I was in graduate school, I read this fascinating work by Mary Douglas called *Purity and Danger*. It was a study that went from ancient Hebrew rituals about what is clean and unclean up through the contemporary practice of African tribes having to do with the same thing.

And all this relates to our own understanding of those patterns or rituals or traditions we have that bring order to our lives; that help us to know who we are; that keep at bay the danger of a community falling apart. In our modern lingo, we might talk about having ‘healthy boundaries.’

Purity, in other words, is less about morality and more about security. It’s about belonging and the boundaries that keep us safe.

So, according to Mary Douglas, something is ‘unclean’ because it is out of place or it has no place in the structures we have created. It’s the dis-order that threatens the order we have created for ourselves. It’s a difference that challenges our sense of identity. Something is ‘dirty’ because, whatever it is, it is perceived as dangerous.

Having grown up among the Baptists that don't drink or dance or smoke or chew, or go with girls or boys who do (by now you have figured out that we aren't that kind of Baptists), I am aware that in that system, these prohibitions were part of our purity code. It was a way of identifying ourselves and creating order for our lives and keeping us separate and safe, we were told, from being tainted by the world.

Having outgrown that way of looking at the world, I haven't had very nice things to say about it. There is a legalism there that can be deadly.

But when a loved one calls you in an alcohol-fueled depression to say goodbye because she has just taken a massive dose of pills to end her life or when a father calls to tell you that a young man you love and helped to raise is in a coma with a blood-alcohol level twice the amount that could kill someone, not drinking isn't about purity anymore. It's about danger. Real danger. The kind that can kill you.

Don't get me wrong. I have no interest in going back to that old purity code. I am painfully aware that someone can have washed hands and a heart that is far from clean. I know what it is to be so caught up in a kind of purity that can make excuses for a heart that's bitter and hateful and hands that are destructive.

But I also know that there are boundaries that help us remember who we are and help us belong to each other and that give us the strength and the hope we need to go on living in this world.

I think it would be unhelpful for us to read this story in Mark about eating with unwashed hands as an automatic rejection of those patterns – religious or otherwise – that actually intend to give us a sense of belonging and boundaries that will keep us safe.

Ask anyone in a recovery group and I suspect they will tell you that abstaining from alcohol or sexual activity or gambling or certain kinds of relationships is not about some kind of moral purity. It's about danger. It's not some new form of legalism. It's about love and about choosing to love your life again.

When Mary Douglas does her study, she says there are two kinds of danger when it comes to purity. There is the danger of not having any boundaries to keep us safe and the danger of turning those boundaries into insurmountable walls that make us unwilling to take the risk of really touching the world because we are afraid of getting our hands dirty.

As the quote at the beginning of your order of worship says, “... the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be hard and dead as stone when we get it.”

In other words, the second level danger of purity is that it makes our interactions with the world less life-giving – less about the reach of our hearts and more about the restrictions of our hands. In the name of security, purity lends itself to apathy and isolation and exclusion.

The stories in Mark that lead up to this one are about Jesus healing a man with an “unclean” spirit and about touching a leper. The leper pleads with Jesus, “you can make me clean,” and, the story says, “Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him;” that is, Jesus in the name of compassion was willing to get his hands dirty.

And this is not the first time the religious folks have been angry with Jesus and his friends. They have defiled their hands by picking corn on the Sabbath; by eating with those they think are ‘unclean;’ by touching the ‘unclean’ woman with hemorrhages and the little girl who was dead (both on the list of things that can make your hands dirty); and, immediately before this story at the end of Mark 6, the crowd grows larger as more and more people – the ‘great unwashed’ -- “begged Jesus that they might touch even the fringe of his garment” and all who did so, the story says, were healed.

So by the time we get to Mark 7 and the concern about eating with unwashed hands, what’s at stake is pretty clear. Jesus is asking people to think not only about the danger of having no boundaries, but what happens to us as human beings when we are more concerned about our own purity and security than the danger to our souls posed by hardened hearts and not unwashed but unwilling hands.

At the risk of being too literal about all this, I want to say that if you are serving me food in a restaurant I would prefer for you to have washed your hands. It’s the law after all. When you go into a restaurant it’s posted that you have to wash your hands before you return to work.

If you are going to visit me in the hospital there is a protocol about washing your hands coming in and washing your hands going out.

That’s not about some weird religious or moral purity. It’s about the very real danger posed by unwashed hands.

And you can be sure that as flu season is upon us, I will get a call from someone asking that I make some kind of public statement about not shaking hands or hugging people as we welcome one another because there is a very real danger of infecting people.

That, of course, makes sense.

But I have to say that I always struggle with that request because I wonder if it doesn't feed that fear that seems so easily to surface in our hearts that makes us wary of one another so that the only safe way to relate to each other is to keep other people at arms-length. I wonder if it contributes to our seeing each other as untrustworthy germ-infested threats rather than fellow humans – if it feeds that fear of contamination that reinforces our inclination to isolation.

I get it. There is a real danger. But that danger is not just about the risk of contamination. It's also about the danger that, for the sake of safety, we will lose something of the compassion of our hearts and the willingness we might have to get our hands dirty for the sake of healing the world.

On more than one occasion I have had folks in my office in various states of distress, some of whom were pretty clearly 'unclean' in the sense that they haven't had a bath in a very long time. Sometimes, at the end of the conversation, one of them will say, "can I get a hug?"

I am no saint. Everything within me recoils at the idea of actually touching that person.

But that's what I do because, at some point, you have to decide which is the greater risk – the danger of being contaminated or the danger of a lack of compassion.

I think about those doctors and nurses that go to do the work of caring for people stricken with Ebola. Of course, for their own sakes and the sake of others they take the medical precautions necessary. But they go.

I'm thinking this morning about Jose Sanchez who ran to the site of a crash and put his hands into a burning car and saved the life of a little baby.

I think of friends who face addiction every day not simply by not drinking but by embracing other addicts.

I think of all the less dramatic opportunities that present themselves every day to get our hands a little dirty for the sake of healing the world.

There are a lot of definitions of love.

But at least one of them has to be the willingness to get our hands dirty for the sake of healing the world.

*If we only have love  
We can reach those in pain  
We can heal all our wounds  
We can use our own names.*

If we only have love.

And today, if you hear Love's voice calling your name, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966). The quote is found on page 161. A similar and more recent work is William Countryman's *Dirt, Greed & Sex* (Fortress Press, 1988), see pp.83-87 about this text from Mark and the biblical issues relate to 'clean' and 'unclean.' The reference to "If we only have love," is from the lyrics of Jacques Brel's song by that title.