

CLEAN HEARTS AND DIRTY HANDS

Mark 7:1 -8, 14-15, 21-23

It's a phrase we still use today: he has dirty hands. We could be referring to hands that are soiled from doing good honest labor. The mechanic who works on our car may have dirty hands but it is no discredit to him. It comes with the territory. The farmer may have dirt all over his body from working all day in the fields. And we honor him because he or she helps feed our world. There is no disgrace in having dirty hands. Unless, of course, we mean it in a metaphorical sense: his hands are soiled with dishonesty, infidelity, greed. If we say the banker, or the politician, or even the preacher has dirty hands, it is usually a serious matter indeed.

The disciples were eating with dirty hands. At least, that is what the Pharisees believed. Some of the disciples did not perform the correct ritual cleansing of their hands before they ate. This probably reflected the coarseness of their backgrounds. Fishermen do not observe all the niceties that refined folks observe. They live in a different world. Some would say they live in the real world. But it disturbed the Pharisees. It glared out at them like someone picking their teeth in a fine restaurant. Like someone not having a blessing at a dinner gathering of clergy. It's bad form.

And the Pharisees were big on form. I mean, if someone doesn't stand for good taste what will happen to us? There were certain traditions that must be maintained. They were opera-goers in a world of boom-boxes cranking out urban rap. They watched "Masterpiece Theater" on public television while their unwashed neighbors watched "Reality TV". Somebody has to save our culture from the degradation of common tastes. It's easy to ridicule the Pharisees, but they were the people who helped maintain standards in a world "Slouching Toward Gomorrah," to use Robert Bork's colorful phrase. They were guardians of good taste, gatekeepers at the walls of tradition.

Mark tells us that the disciples were eating with dirty hands and the scribes and the Pharisees were disturbed. Then Mark gives this editorial comment. “The Pharisees, and all the Jews,” he tells us, “do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 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.”

Tradition is an interesting phenomenon. It has its pluses. It has helped our Jewish friends maintain their identity over thousands of years of history. And it surely sounds as if someone had some pre-scientific insights into personal hygiene in these dictates. Tradition had its positives. It also has its minuses. Someone has expressed its minuses like this:

POT ROAST Story

Be careful about worshiping tradition. It's fine to maintain continuity with the past--as long as keeping traditions does not hinder us from being effective in the present.

The disciples were defiling the sacred traditions by foregoing the ritual of washing their hands, and this upset the Pharisees. Religious traditionalists still find reasons to be upset today.

Back in 1904, ten-year-old Virginia Cary Hudson wrote these words as part of a school essay on “Etiquette at Church.”

“Before I go into the house of the Lord with praise and thanksgiving, I lift up mine eyes unto the town clock from whence cometh the time to see if I am late. It is not etiquette to be late.

“Do not hop, skip, jump or slide in the church vestibule. Tip. Tip all the way to your seat. Be sure and do not sit in other people's pews. Jesus wouldn't care, but other people would.”

And that's the point, isn't it? God didn't care that the disciples ate with unwashed hands, but other people did.

A church growth specialist named Bill Easum authored a book several years ago titled, *Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers*.

What a great title! In it he told a couple of horror stories about churches wedded to sacred cows--churches that were determined to do things the way they had always been done. For example, he told about a church that was over one hundred years old and had been declining in membership for thirty years. However, it was still a church with over 400 in worship. Over the past three years young couples had begun buying up homes in the area and remodeling them. Two or three of these young couples had joined the church and asked the church to provide a better nursery.

At the height of this church's history, the nursery was across the hall from the worship center. However, thirty years ago it had been moved to the basement, and for the past ten years had been closed. At present, it was used as a storage room. The basement was damp and musty.

The young couples approach the pastor about starting a nursery, returning it to its original place, and providing a paid sitter. The pastor tells them they have to talk with the Trustee Committee because what they want involves the use of the facilities, and they have to talk with the Finance Committee because the move involves money. The couples take a deep breath.

The Trustees say that the nursery could be started, but it had to remain in the basement because the women's organization maintains the old nursery location as a parlor. "The parlor isn't used much," they say, "but the women have put a lot of money into making it a lovely place." The Finance Committee would not authorize any funds for a paid sitter, because the members did not need a paid sitter when they were young.

The nursery is reestablished in the basement. However, a few things still must be stored in it; the basement is still damp; the carpet still has stains of unmentionable origin. The young couples offer to

spend their own money to decorate the nursery and pay a sitter, but the board replies that the church does not encourage designated giving.

Two years and several thousand new couples in the area later, the church continues to decline and grow older, and the few young couples that had once been members moved on to a more friendly environment. William Easum writes, “A report came to me from the defeated pastor that the church leadership was convinced that they had done the right thing by refusing to spend the money to move the nursery and pay a sitter. After all, the young couples weren’t committed enough in the first place or they wouldn’t have left!”

Holy cow! Holy sacred cow! Somebody needs to hold a barbeque. Remember the seven last words of the church? “We’ve never done it like that before.”

The Pharisees were good folk. Actually they were some of the best people in the community. They were simply bound to their traditions. And the sad thing was: this kept them from being effective in their service to God. The Pharisees and the scribes asked Jesus, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

I have to tell you that Jesus was a little harsh with these keepers of the status quo. 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; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Wouldn’t you agree this was harsh? But put yourself in Jesus’ place. He was trying to help people see God in a new way. So naturally the people who hindered him the most were those who could only see God in the old way. Doubtless Jesus would have the same difficulty today. Doubtless Jesus DOES have the same difficulty today. Christ will always be an up-setter of the status quo because Christ is always calling us to higher ground. Christ is always doing a new thing in our

lives because he is continually helping us see new realities.

In his book, *The Reputation of the Church*, G. Avery Lee cited four diseases which often strike the church: 1. sleeping sickness, the disease of a church that falls asleep in the midst of possibilities for ministry; 2. cirrhosis of the giver, the money malady of a church that practices improper stewardship and thus limits its ministry; 3. hardening of the hearteries, the disease of the heart in which a church loses its compassion and concern for those who are in need; and 4. spiritual myopia, the lack of vision that keeps a church from seeing the long-term possibilities for ministry.

Heaven help us if we suffer from any of these dread diseases. But certainly we could add a fifth disease: traditionitis, an obsession with where we've been that obscures where we're going.

But what is true of a church can also be true of an individual. Is God trying to do a new thing in your life? Is God challenging some of your old prejudices? Is God saying to you that you've gotten a little too comfortable with the status quo--that God has more to show you about the meaning of discipleship?

That was the problem with the Pharisees in our story. They were really good people. The problem was they were "well established"--too well established. And that could happen to any of us if our faith is not vital, our relationship with Christ is not intense. Christ wants to open up new possibilities. Christ wants you to move to higher ground. Won't you open your heart to him today?