

Proper 17 B
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Coming Clean

Richard Schaper

Today's gospel is about coming clean.

When you were a child and your mother called you to supper, did she ever say, "Wash your hands and come to table?" My mother did. She understood the value of hand-washing--especially before eating, as she was one also to quote the proverb that "Cleanliness is next to Godliness."

I confess that I never did get in the habit—a wholesome one, I'm sure—of washing my hands every time before I eat. But I do recognize the value of the principle, as I am sure that you do. In St. Mark's gospel account that we have just heard, some of Jesus' co-religionists come to him and ask him why some of his disciples do not wash their hands before they eat. On the face of it, this seems like a perfectly innocent question and a legitimate concern. But there is more to it, much more. (--As you might guess from the angry tenor of Jesus' retort.)

There is more to it because in the religion in which Jesus grew up, washing your hands before eating was not just a sanitary concern but a ritual one. **Hand-washing before eating** was one of those things that helped to define who we as Jews are. **Handwashing before eating** is one of the things "we people" do—like abstaining from pork-- that sets us apart from other types of people—outsiders. Handwashing before eating reinforces on a basic level who we are. Therefore someone among us who dares to eat without washing his hands may be perceived as a threat to our whole system.

(Hand washing before eating—or even before praying—is also true of some other traditional religious groups today. For many Muslims, for example, as well as Middle Eastern Jews, handwashing before eating is a respected ritual inherited from ancestors that helps to define and reinforce our ethnic identity.)

Closer to home, Have you noticed how before Malcolm serves at the Holy Table, a bowl of water is brought to him and water is poured over his hands? Watch today—you'll see it for yourself. This is called the "lavabo"—the washing—and it has its origin in exactly the same tradition that leads to the dispute in today's gospel lesson.

For today's gospel is about coming clean.

Some of Jesus' coreligionists object that some of his disciples eat with unwashed hands. We Jews wash our hands before we eat; we always have, we always will, they imply. So why do your disciples flout this accepted practice?

But Jesus is interested in cleanliness on a whole different level. And so he points to the human heart, for this is where our good as well as evil intentions come from. The heart is the true seat of the human being.

The Pharisees seek to engage Jesus in hand-to-hand combat; but Jesus wants a heart-to-heart. The word that is used in the scripture text to translate how Jesus characterizes those who challenge him is “hypocrites.” For us to call someone a “hypocrite” is a loaded word. But in the context of the Greek language in which the gospels were written, “hypocrite” was the Greek word that denoted the mask-wearing actors in a stage play. Actor wore a mask over their face to costume themselves to play a particular character. Such an actor or “hypocrite” took on a different persona to achieve a certain objective in the play. Now this is a kind of mask-wearing pretending that I can readily identify with—pretending to be more successful or smarter or hip than I really am. If this is what it means to be a “hypocrite” than perhaps I need to listen more closely to what Jesus has to say about us.

For today’s gospel is about coming clean, going behind our masks and personas.

One way that we come clean is by **confessing**. **Confessing is the opposite of denying.**

Oh the house of denial (poet Mary Oliver points out) has thick walls
and very small windows
and whoever lives there, little by little,
will turn to stone.

But confession has the power to roll the stone away, and resurrect from the inside out who we really are, mask-removed, the authentic person whom God has created us to be.

Confessing is the opposite of denying that something is true about ourselves, because that truth makes us uncomfortable. There’s something that we WISH were NOT true about ourselves, that is in conflict with how we want to think of ourselves.

The confession that is the opposite of denying is more likely today to take place over a cup of coffee or glass of wine than it is to take place in a formal confessional. This letting down of our masks can happen when we are given the gift of a confidante who we can trust not to judge us by what we are about to reveal. How precious such a friend is, and how precious it is when we can when we ourselves can offer such an unjudging ear to another!

Earlier this year at St. Stephens, when the Easter season ended with Pentecost, the rite of confession was inadvertently not restored to the liturgy at the 8 o’clock worship service. One regular 8 o’clocker noticed this and said that he missed it. So I sent an email to Dee in the church office, and to John, with the subject line: “We Need to Confess”. The rite was promptly restored.

You will notice that again this morning as part of our regular worship we will make confession. True, this is just a ritual—like washing hands before eating. Repeated the words of the confession can be done in the most perfunctory manner. Or, it can be a window into the house of denial, an opportunity granted in the silence that grants us permission to take off whatever particular mask we may have been wearing, and come before God and one another just as we are. —We can do this because we trust that we have found an ear that will not judge us.

No less than Malcolm’s washing his hands over the silver bowl, our confession during worship is a ritual way that we come clean before God, and ready to eat at God’s Table. “Wash yourself and come to dinner!”

Yes, today's gospel is about coming clean.

You may be one of those people who -- like some of our youngest members—like to dip your fingers in the baptismal water in the font as you enter the sanctuary, as a tangible re-enactment of your baptismal washing. To dip your fingers in the water just a ritual. But so is a kiss. It may be only a passing thing; or, it may have great meaning.

When in today's gospel story, high-church Jews come to Jesus from Jerusalem to complain to him about some of his disciples eating with unwashed hands, Jesus points them—and us—to a concern for cleanliness on an entirely different level—the level of our hearts. This is the “true religion” that is characterized in this morning's epistle reading as caring for the dispossessed—“widows and orphans”—those whose presence among us is inconvenient, like desperate migrants today, whose existence and claims for safety we would like to deny because it upsets our stable sense of well-being.

There is a historic church building in Cincinnati, Ohio, built in the 1850's during the time of Fugitive Slave Act that incorporates into its basement secret chambers in which to conceal runaway slaves who were making their way north to freedom. For church members then to harbor runaway slaves, who were considered stolen property, placed them in jeopardy not only of civil prosecution but also of violence from bounty hunters. The current pastor of this church, preaching to his congregation, directed their attention to the beautiful antique stained glass windows, depicting over the altar Jesus praying to his father on the rock of Gethsemane. “But the **credibility of this church**,” the pastor asserted, “is not in the beautiful stained glass. Furthermore, the credibility of this church is not in the handsomely carved altar and in historic silver communion set. And the credibility of this church is not in the mighty soaring notes of its pipe organ. No,” he concluded, “the credibility of this church is in its basement!”—referring to the tangible witness to its mission to help set people free.

I thought of this story last Sunday when the Search Committee posed to those who gathered in the parish hall the question: “How do you want St. Stephen's to be thought of in our community?” You couldn't say that the credibility of St. Stephen's is in the basement: we don't have one! But you might say that our credibility is-- at least partly- on the roof: in the solar panels that stand for our commitment to care for the earth that God has given us. Or, our credibility is, in part, in the thriving vegetable garden out back that reconnects us with the earth and feeds hungry neighbors. How does “true religion” manifest itself through St. Stephen's?

And how does true religion manifest itself in our own personal lives?—Last Sunday Malcolm prompted us to the spiritual exercise of examining our credit card receipts, checkbooks and daily calendars as if they were evidence that might be seized to see if the charge had any merit that we were Christians as accused. In what does our personal credibility lie? What does the track record of our lives as lived reveal about who we really are and our underlying commitments?

Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah to the effect that:

This people honors me with their lips,
But their hearts are far from me.

These words are a potent challenge to us, as well as to the pretenders of the prophet's and Messiah's own day.

Today's gospel is about coming clean before God and before one another: living an authentic life, of compassion and self-giving service to those with whom we are privileged to share this world.

I invite you, at the end of the ritual of confession a few moments from now, to truly listen to the words of forgiveness and acceptance that Malcolm will speak to me and to you. Receive them as the word that God wishes to speak to me and to you.

Then, made clean, come feast at the Table of the Lord, just as we are, accepted and free. Perhaps it is true what mother says—that there is a kind of cleanliness is indeed next to Godliness.