

“Wash Inside Out” a homily on Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
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“Wash Inside Out” Have you ever seen that instruction on a piece of clothing? When I first started doing my own laundry, I didn’t understand that phrase. I soon realized that it meant my tie-die tee shirt with sequins, or my denim shirt with appliqué on the front: you turn it inside out so that it gets really clean, without harming the beauty of the outside. Most of us understand that instruction. But apparently some of the religious leaders of Jesus day did not understand it.

In early Hebrew Scripture, in Exodus, we find prescriptions for the ritual washing of hands and feet before entering the tent of meeting; rules given to Moses and passed on to Aaron and his sons. These became codified in Leviticus and were enshrined as important part of ritual law. Indeed, some of the practices for cleanliness, not only of hands but of foods and pots and kettles, had their roots in very real practical needs for sanitation, perhaps for survival. Because things outside the temple were considered as sacred as those things inside the temple, uncleanness with common household objects, and of those who would handle them, was not only a disregard of treasured tradition, but of the God who stipulated a rigorous kosher etiquette.

In many ways we can empathize with the Pharisees and scribes who came to Jesus to insist on common, ordinary cleanliness. After all, it was rude, at best, and unsanitary at worst, for Jesus’ disciples to eat with unwashed hands, and then handle common receptacles for eating and drinking with those same hands. The contempt of the religious authorities was understandable; the perceived gross misconduct of the disciples was a blatant slap in the face at millennia of tradition dating back to the Levitical laws of Moses. Be honest – there is more of the Pharisee in each of us than we care to admit. We are all attached to our traditions, our time-honored ways of doing and being, and it is hard to see beyond them.

But Jesus warns them: he accuses them of having gotten so concerned over the letter-perfect tradition that they have forgotten what is really important about the meaning of the law, and about the real core of their faith. Just as the people were not made to serve the Sabbath, indeed the Sabbath was made to serve us, for our benefit; so the law was not made to create an external barrier, a superficial measure of who is acceptable in God’s eyes, but to provide a mutual understanding of how to serve God. Here Jesus challenges the Great Tradition of purity laws which were almost impossible to keep by farmers, fishers and travelers, and which were used to define who was in and who was out. He looks at the law which makes sense in a city, but not in the country, and he says it is not what goes into a person that defiles, it is what comes out. There are ethical issues deeper than the keeping of the letter of the law. Neither rules about hand washing nor the rules for temple gifts absolve Christians of their obligation for candor, charity, love of family. Do the Pharisees demand lip service or heart service?

I certainly don’t read this as a condemning of all Pharisees, nor of all outward forms of religion. Jesus is not against maintaining the traditions of the elders. He finds nothing

wrong with washing hands thoroughly or cups, pots and bronze kettles. Jesus condemns outward religion that is devoid of inward faith. He condemns when we begin to worship the form but not the substance; the ritual but not the faithful understanding of the ritual.

He particularly condemns public religious behavior when that behavior condemns, separates, and attacks others. In today's Gospel that is exactly what his unwashed disciples experience. With Moses and every prophet, Jesus in solidarity, calls such behavior hypocrisy. He repeats what has been said from the beginning, Ritual without justice is dead.

Jesus abhorred legalism, for at the root of legalism is our human desire to justify ourselves before God. If we could follow the rules, there would be no need to turn to God; we would be able to be perfect without depending on or surrendering to God; there would be no need to listen to the revelation of God. For Jesus, legalism is pseudo-holiness: a holiness dependent solely on what we do without changing from the inside out.

Jesus understood the whole idea of "washing inside out": what defiles is not from the outside, but what is already deep within, the choices we make based on selfish or evil impulses. True piety, Jesus says, comes from the heart, then affects the action.

There is plenty of ritual-righteousness religion around. Indeed, today is the eve of Labor Day, a day of honoring those who toil. Perhaps even more importantly, it is the official beginning of the 2006 midterm election campaigns. Without question, the role of outward religion will be a part and parcel of the campaigns, just as it is in our scripture lesson this morning. We are summoned not to a sectarian religiosity that divides, segregates, and condemns many in America, but one with a religion which calls us to love and serve one another in solidarity. We must watch out for the kind of public religion where prayer is not worship but a weapon, asserting the rights of the majority over those of the minority. In the words of Isaiah, "Those people honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote." (29:13) Religion that connects our hearts, hands, and lips: That is the core of our faithful response to God's covenant.

While it might seem to some people that Jesus' interpretation of purity was less demanding than that of the Pharisees, he does not expect less from his disciples or from us. It is not a purity that comes from a sprinkling of water or in the keeping of any other religious tradition but from turning our hearts to God, a God of ever ongoing creation, of new possibilities, of extreme love, (not condemnation,) for every living being.

Wouldn't it be great if people came with care tags the way laundry does? But we already know that our struggles come from inside insecurities, fears, egos; we know that we need to be washed from the inside out -- and that God does that for us, if we allow it, on gentle cycle.