

## Sanitized or Sanctified?

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

14th Sunday after Pentecost - August 29, 2021

Texts: James 1:17-27, Psalm 15, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

James 1:17-27 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

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

*After our sojourn with the Bread of Life in John, we return to Mark's version of Jesus' life and ministry. As his works of mercy and healing attract larger crowds, religious authorities fear losing the loyalty of the common people. They find fault with him and his disciples' practices. As usual, their quarrelsome nitpicking backfires!*

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, 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.) 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?" 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." Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

In my younger days, when I had courageous feet and happier hip joints, I loved hiking in the backcountry, out beyond designated campsites with their picnic tables and smelly pit toilets. In my backpack I carried a little orange plastic trowel: bright orange so it was hard to lose, plastic for weight, and pointed for digging a little hole somewhere off the trail when a different kind of nature called. Imagine my delight when I discovered, in Deuteronomy, this little verse buried in a pile of other laws Moses gave the Hebrew people: “With your utensils you shall have a trowel; when you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your waste.” No kidding! (Deut. 23:13)

You may have thought Moses didn’t know....much, but you’d be surprised. Germs and bacteria might have been Greek to him, but he understood filth and contagion. That they’re unhealthy. That they make people sick. A lot of Old Testament laws, so tedious to read, actually reflect a surprisingly modern sense of hygiene. Whether from observation or straight from the mouth of God, these laws protected the community. They show a deep concern for others.

By Jesus’ time, a lot of these helpful hygiene rules had hardened into ritual. They lost their original meaning and function. Like handwashing. Sure, it’s a good idea to wash your hands before eating. But not just because Moses and his pals said so. When Jesus says, “You’ve abandoned God’s commandment to cling to human tradition,” he means they’ve dropped the “looking out for each other” bit in favor of “look how good I am.” Now it’s not about sanitation, it’s about sanctimony or, in plain English, “I’m holier than thou.” It’s ego-driven, not heartfelt.

Hand hygiene is a big thing these days, too, as are masking, distancing, getting vaccinated. Along with them, the questions about, should these things be mandated? What would Moses, the law-giver say? My guess? “Yes!” What would Jesus the healer say? I think he’d say, “It’s already written into the law! Love your neighbor as yourself. Do whatever you can to keep them healthy and safe. If you won’t do that of your own free will, then you probably need the law.”

But he goes on to point out something more disturbing: the primary human problem is not the dirt that lives on our skin but the malice that lives in our hearts. That’s what makes us unfit to live in God’s presence, or for God to live in us. Of course, God lives in us no matter what nasty things we do, but our nastiness doesn’t leave God much breathing room in there. When we entertain negative thoughts about people, when we treat people as objects (as sexism does), or as inferior (as racism does) or as less deserving than ourselves (as classism does), that’s not coming from the God-spot inside us.

The only cure for *sanctimoniousness* is introspection and heart-cleansing. The word for this starts down the same road, but then takes a different path: *sanctification*. That’s a fancy name for letting the Holy Spirit into the inner room you try to keep hidden from the world, the place where you keep all your petty meanness and prejudice, and let her sort through it with you, and see

what needs to be thrown out. Because those things are never as well disguised as we think. They creep out in ugly ways we may not even be aware of.

Now if we were living in a perfect world, when the yucky stuff leaked out, we'd notice it. We'd be appalled. Our mess would stand out like muddy footprints on a clean kitchen floor. Oops. But we don't live in a perfect world. We live in the world we were born into; it feels normal.

It's like the two young fish who're swimming along and meet an older fish swimming in the opposite direction. He says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" They swim along for a while, and then one of the young fish turns to the other one and says, "What the heck is water?" It takes a certain degree of insight to become aware of the systems we live and swim in every day. But if toxic waste had somehow gotten into that water, those young fish would have noticed pretty quickly: they might have seen other fish suffering and dying. They might have fallen ill themselves. They might have recognized the danger long before the old fellow did. A pollution detector seems to be built into us, until we are taught otherwise.

My dear friend Ellen grew up in a small southern town in the 50s. Her father was the chief medical officer of the hospital, so she had the run of the facility. Once, when she was just six or seven, she found a patient all by himself on a makeshift bed in the basement. She could see he was sick; she ran to tell her father a terrible mistake had been made. Her father explained that if that man were upstairs, the other patients would stop coming to the hospital. That explanation made no sense whatsoever to Ellen, and she stood her ground. She stood it so firmly that her father eventually stood up to the Board of Trustees and the wrath of the town, and the hospital began to treat Black patients like every other human being.

Especially interesting to me is that I didn't meet Ellen until she had already been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Before the illness took root, she had been a therapist and spiritual director, and was deeply loved in our small *northern* town for her wisdom and compassion. As is often the case with dementia patients, she tended to repeat the same stories over and over--the stories that had shaped her life. She told me this story many times; frequently with tears, for that lonely sick man in the basement, and for the moment when she first recognized the pollution in her seemingly safe pond and instinctively knew that something needed to change.

Our world is full of intertwined woes: all those complex systems that conspire to privilege some people over others. Tracing their origins may be difficult, but I think Jesus would remind us that they start within the collective human heart, and run deeper than our skin. They infest even our most revered institutions: our government, our schools, our churches. And yet, we are not born with this pollution; it is not incurable. There is a future for human goodness and the cure is found in the story of God's persistent love for us. But the cure may run headlong into traditions and patterns that are as dear to us as the ritual of hand washing was to certain critics of Jesus, or as

segregation was to the white people of Ellen's town. Pushback then was strong. It always is. Pushback is a good sign. It tells us we're shaking the systems we're trying to change, that people are trying harder to keep the truth locked in the basement.

Are we willing to let the Holy Spirit shine her Light in our shameful corners? James refers to God as the Father of lights, who, "gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures." This rich promise, James says, doesn't just end by finding a cozy spot in our own personal happy place, but in action: "caring for orphans and widows in their distress." By *doing*, you nourish the pure seed planted in you, and get back to the original goodness you were born with, and to the perfection God planned for you from the beginning.

My joints are a little too old for hiking up and down mountains; and I passed childbearing age a long time ago. And yet something in my bones tells me that God is not through with me or the church or the world - and that "though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet." What's happening *is* birth: a new beginning, a clear-sighted rejection of the places where we got addicted to our mistakes, and an embrace of the "Divine nature reemerging from deep within us. We do not have to create it. We *cannot* create it. But we can let it be born in our lives."<sup>1</sup>

Maybe we need to give ourselves and our institutions a good going over, and let the light of the Spirit help us decide what's essential to this new life and what's just superfluous. Waste. And then take a little trowel, dig a hole, and - you know the rest. Amen. Thanks be to God.

### Prayers

~Beloved Creator, Savior, Friend, we are dead without your love within us, and lost without your light showing us our way - a better way than we have chosen for ourselves. Bring us to new birth and new visions of shared health and wealth in our world.

~We are yours - your people, your church. Show us how to act like it, and in acting, to grow in strength and courage and love toward those who suffer: In Afghanistan, Haiti, in places devastated by weather and destroyed by fire, in hospitals where covid patients again fill ICUs.

~We pray for those who see their right to voice and vote in our country being legislated away from them. Help us to see beyond the surface of things to their deep causes and be ready to change ourselves, first of all, and then those around us.

~Heal the sick, abide with the dying, comfort those who mourn, and touch us all with the sure conviction that you have not abandoned us or your world but will see your kingdom born again among us, for as Jesus taught us, we now pray, "Our Father...."

---

<sup>1</sup> Newell, J. Philip, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, introduction.