

Mark 7:1-23
Lent Midweek 4

March 25, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

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Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, it is possible that right now, if everyone is following CDC and WHO guidelines, we have some of the cleanest hands we have ever had. Seriously, I don't think I have ever washed my hands as much as I have in the past couple of weeks. Of course, we all hopefully already washed our hands before dinner, after using the restroom, before handling foods, after a sneeze or cough when we didn't remember cover our mouth with our elbow instead of our hands. These are things we learned to do back in kindergarten. Some of us had already been better at following these instructions than others. And now, most people are making sure their hands are clean.

But it's not just the normal stuff. It's for and after everything now. Opened a door? Wash your hands! Flipped a light switch? Wash your hands! Used the remote control for your own television? Wash your hands! It's getting out of hand!

Gone are the days of the "5-second" rule when dropping food. And bachelors can no longer simply lick clean or rinse the silverware before putting it back in the drawer. BTW, that's gross, even after this pandemic blows over, if you had been doing that before, stop it...forever! Everything has to be clean right now. Everyone has to be clean. One person even commented about using Lysol wipes to disinfect the outside of the Lysol wipes container. Everything is disinfected in our homes these days.

And don't get me wrong. I'm not saying washing our hands is a bad thing. Please do wash your hands. It's just... Well, have you ever thought about how often you touch your face? Maybe in the past few weeks you have, but I didn't really think about it *that* much before. And I'm noticing it all the time now. An itch comes up and you scratch it. Your glasses slip down and you adjust them. A hair from your own head or maybe your pet gets on your face and you brush it aside. Or maybe you're just reading the newspaper or a book and you rest your head on your hand. That counts too.

Maybe some of you noticed that you were touching your face while listening to this. And probably some of you started to feel an itch on your forehead or nose and now have to resist the urge to scratch it. As soon as we touch our faces, that bacteria or virus living inside of us gets on our hands again. And back to the sink we have to go for more washing.

As I was thinking this past week about all of this washing, I was reminded of our Gospel reading for tonight. The Pharisees are doing what Pharisees do again. They are challenging Jesus. He is gathered with His disciples and the Pharisees noticed something peculiar about them. These Jewish men were not washing before dinner. Who knows? They may have actually washed their hands, but they weren't performing the ceremonial washing.

But Jesus in the later verses of our reading cuts to the heart of the matter. The problem isn't just their hands, their vessels, or their dining couches that are dirty. The problem is their hearts remained unclean. Inwardly there was still contamination. And as many times as they would wash the outside, the filth of the inside would keep coming out. Kind of the spiritual equivalent of touching your face. The sin inside still remained. And it was seeping out. **Evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.** They could scrub all they wanted. But the sickness within would remain.

During this season of our lives, we are constantly reminded by media and doctors that we need to wash up. We need to do our part to prevent the spread of infection. We are quick to remember that we need to wash our hands. And we are also quick to remind others that they need to wash theirs. But during this season of Lent we also need to look at the deeper contamination. We are so preoccupied right now with the current medical crisis sweeping the globe that we need to make sure we aren't distracted from the thing infecting our hearts, the thing that can kill the soul.

Romans 5 tells us that our deeper infection started with one man. And from Adam it spread to everyone else. None of us is immune. We are all infected. God judges the heart, and He says it is

contaminated. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We can scrub all we want, but we are helpless to do anything to free ourselves from this condition. This is why in our confession we say those words, "sinful and unclean," because we are all unclean by nature. It's in our heart and we can't reach there. The only one who can clean our inward parts is the One who formed our inward parts. ^{Psalm 139:13}

In the Old Covenant this cleansing was done by the shedding and the sprinkling of the blood of animals. But these were all in anticipation of the one great sacrifice for all sin.

Hebrews 10 tells us ¹¹ "every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified."

Near the end of Matthew's Gospel, we see our High Priest standing before a crowd. Pilate is with Him. Pilate didn't find any guilt in Jesus and did not want Him to be crucified. But fearing a riot from the crowd, Pilate washed his own hands with water as he turned Jesus over to them to do with Him what they would. ^{Matthew 27:24-25} **And all the people answered "His blood be on us and on our children!"**

The irony is that even as the people said it, they had no idea the deeper meaning of what they were saying. They had no idea that this was exactly what was about to happen. The cross is where we are all washed clean. It is where the blood of the Lamb would be spilled to cover the sins of the world. And it would cover them. It would cover all of their sin. It would cover Pilate's. It would also cover the sins of the Pharisees. It would cover the sins of the disciples. And it would cover the sins of you and me. It is the only washing that is 100% effective, the only washing that could cleans our hearts, the only washing that could remove the stain of sin.

This washing was done once and for all. There is no need to keep washing, but we do remember this washing each day as we remember our baptismal identity. Because our baptism is what unites us with Christ's death and His resurrection. It is where this washing is applied directly to each of us.

As we draw near to the end of this Lenten season, as we keep giving up some of our time for extra washing of our hands, I invite you, as the water from the faucet pours over your hands, remember those waters that were combined with God's Word and poured over your head and cleansing your heart. The recommendation is to wash for 20-30 seconds. But just a little more time is enough to remember your baptismal faith articulated in the words of the Apostle's Creed which we now confess:

**I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth.
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day He rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Christian Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life ✠ everlasting. Amen.**