

Belonging

Human beings seem to be uncomfortable with being dirty. For the most part, we like clean things. We wash our hands, our bodies, our dishes, our food, our floors, our cars, our windows, and even our pets. It is a never-ending task because nothing ever seems to stay clean. Dog and horses embody this propensity to be dirty for when they have finally been rinsed and dried down and let go, the very first thing they do is find a good dusty spot and roll over in it! They don't seem to appreciate our idea of cleanliness.

What does it mean then, to be clean? What are we trying to accomplish and why? We like to think that being clean means the absence of dirt or germs and that is certainly one way to look at it. But being clean is more than just the lack of something. It is really about putting things back in their proper place. **It is putting things where they belong.**

When we clean things, we simply rearrange matter. Nothing ever “goes away”. Bits of soil and lint and grass and food don't belong the floor so we “clean” it by gathering all those things up and putting them in the trash or outside, where they belong. We wash our hands before we eat because the germs that are on them don't belong inside our bodies. We tell our children to “clean” their rooms which means “put everything back where it belongs,” including the dust on top of the dresser. Cleanliness is very relative. When I was a boy and my dad told me to “clean the calf shed” I knew I wasn't supposed to dust it. Dust in the calf shed belonged there but too much manure did not!

So what kind of cleanliness are Jesus and the Pharisees talking about in today's reading from Mark? And what are they talking about when they say things are “defiled”? Well it has almost nothing to do with getting the germs off of your hands. Instead it had everything to do with **belonging**. This kind of “washing” or “cleaning” is something difficult for us to understand because it is not an everyday part of our culture. It was a ritual washing, done to symbolically remove the ordinary – the common – the unholy – the defiling “stuff” (or in other words the *human* stuff) in order to be partake in holy or pure or divine things. Another word for “defiled” might be “polluted”. Holiness, as well as defilement, was transferable. Touching unholy and common things, which had not been “washed” or purified, would make one unholy and therefore out of place for a people set apart by God. Guilt by association is still guilt.

The troubling aspect to all of this for Jesus seems to be that the purity system does not do what it claims. Washing yourself or the things you touch does not make you a clean (that is a *holy*) person. The dirt goes much deeper. It is what is inside that separates us from God. We are sinful people. All of us. No outward appearance of goodness or holiness or churchi-ness is going to change that. Deep down, most of the Pharisees knew this and yet they wanted to keep up the appearance of holiness as a way to set themselves, and all Jews, apart from what they saw as the rest of the sinful world.

Washing your hands and cups and pots and everything else was a way to create a boundary that made clear who belonged and who didn't – who was clean and who was dirty. Some things don't change, even over 2000 years.

We often think we have a step up on someone else because we judge ourselves to be clean and them to be dirty but we would be wise to look for ourselves in the actions of the Pharisees. Too often in our dealings with other people, we attempt to “put them where they belong” – which is outside of God's realm of infinite love and grace. We look at the list of evil intentions that come from the heart and we automatically start thinking about how they apply to *someone else*. We like to make the devil our scapegoat for evil in the world but Jesus points to us and says that evil lies within each of us.

Not such good news is it. Not much gospel in today's gospel. Jesus points out the flaws we use in determining who is “in” and who is “out” and proceeds to place the location of evil within the human heart but he gives us no clarity on how to get out of this mess. There is plenty of talk about what makes us dirty but little about how to be clean... or is there?

Jesus points to the commandment of God as the alternative to our own ideas about right and wrong, about clean and defiled. But what exactly is that command? Aren't there like 600 and some commandments the Jews were supposed to follow? But THE command, the one from which all commands flow was the one memorized by all Jews - the great Shema of Deut 6:4

Shema Israel, adonai elhenu, andoai echod. Hear Oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

This, Jesus says a few chapters later in Mark, is the first and the greatest commandment and the second is like it: Love you neighbor as yourself.

This is holiness. This is cleanliness. Loving God and neighbor is the intention God has always had for us. It is *where we belong* and when we fulfill this command, everything is in its proper place. But how is this to happen if there is nothing inside of us that can fulfill this commandment? **Cleanliness cannot be our own doing.** That is why we must move forward, as we always do, to the whole work of Jesus for us on the cross. In Jesus God did more than just declare food clean. God declared us clean. The great love of God for the world is shown to us in the movement of God into our dirty and messy world as Jesus took upon himself the evil intentions of our hearts and buried that sin and guilt in a tomb forever. Now, through the gentle and insistent voice of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to live new lives with new hearts. And even though evil is still present in us, it will not win the day! We are free to love with abandon and belong forever to the kingdom of God.

And now for the really cool part. We actually have a ritual washing that serves as a sign of this great promise. To *baptize* is a common Greek word that means “dip”, “immerse” or “wash”. In English, we don't see it in the text for today but it is there. “For the Pharisees do not eat anything from the market unless they baptize it.” But ours is a different kind of washing. It is not just a ceremony we do for appearances. Yes we may pour the water and say the words but it is God who does the real washing and the true

cleaning. By itself, it is just a little water splashed on the head of a baby. It's not even enough to get the germs off. But with the Word of promise given to us by Jesus and with faith in the power of God, this washing is the sign of our true place of belonging. We belong to God with all of our heart and soul and mind. We may not realize it all at once - and for sure there will be slips and falls along the way - but we are being transformed more and more into lovers of God and neighbor. The old boundaries of belonging are being dismantled and by God's power, we are consecrated to not only be hearers but doers of God's good work in the world. Now that's a washing that works. Amen.