

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost
September 2, 2018
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Song of Solomon 2:8-13
Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

There's an old story about an Episcopalian who dies and goes to heaven.

St. Peter offers to take her on a tour, an offer she eagerly accepts. And everything is lovely as she could possibly have hoped. Until they come upon a pit where there are people gnashing their teeth and wailing, and the woman asks, "Who's down there?"

St. Peter says, "Oh, those are the Catholics who ate meat on Fridays."

They walk a little farther on, and all is more than she'd have imagined once more. Until they come upon another pit with groaning and wailing, and she says, "Okay, so who's down there?"

St. Peter tells her, "Those are the Baptists who went to dances."

And then the tour continues as before. And, again, all is right in earth and heaven. Until, once more, they come upon another pit and people down there gnashing their teeth and crying and ripping their garments. And she says, "And those people?"

"Oh, those are the Episcopalians who ate their salads with their dessert forks." ⁱ

(And then, at least as I imagine it, he gave her a little push!)

I hope I haven't offended any Roman Catholics or Baptists among us. That's not my point. My intent, actually, is to offend Episcopalians here among us.

As if Episcopalians are, by definition, self-satisfied and self-important and self-congratulatory. As if we're the kind of people who know which fork to use in formal dining, the kind of people who believe that such knowledge is important, the kind of people who think such knowledge is what separates us from "common folk," from the "unwashed masses."

It's not reality, of course. It's a caricature of an Episcopalian. And I doubt any of us would accept it as a fair representation of who we are these days (if it ever did).

That's a cautionary tale for us, I think. It'd be easy to accept at face value the Pharisees and scribes who come to Jesus in this morning's gospel. But if we're not careful, that's not reality; it's just a caricature. And lest we dismiss them as nothing more than persnickety prigs, I think we'd do well to wonder why they cared about why Jesus' disciples didn't wash their hands.

Back in the book of Exodus, there's a story about a nomadic tribe being told that they were to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." They were to be "set apart" from the other nations.

And one of their distinctive ways had to do with how their priests would offer sacrifices. As they entered the tent of meeting, and before they approached the altar, they had to wash their hands (and their feet). That's how it started.

Much later, when the Temple was destroyed, they lost ritual objects; there were no altars for the priests to go to with hands freshly washed. So the rabbis, wanting to hold on to who they were as a people, translated the old handwashing practices to the more common altar, the dining room table. In essence, they sought to make the common holy. ⁱⁱ

And it occurs to me that nothing wrong – and much right – about not settling for being like everyone else. And it would still be a fine thing for any of us to look for ways to be intentional about seeking holiness in ordinary tasks and daily meals and everyday living. At their best, that's the virtue of the traditions observed by the Pharisees and the scribes.

But at their worst – and this seems to be the case in our gospel this morning – the old ways have become something else entirely. Rather than seeking holiness in everyday living, a countercultural calling, their traditions have devolved into pettiness: merely a way merely to decide who's in and who's out. Handwashing has become knowing which fork to use, a test to determine who might rest upon the soft and fluffy clouds and who belongs in the pit.

And so the Pharisees and scribes focus on how some of Jesus' disciples don't wash up; they eat with what are described as "defiled hands." It sounds kind of nasty. And it's supposed to. Now that's probably an apt translation, "defiled." And it's probably a good translation. It's probably the correct translation. It's probably the right translation.

But the thing is, it's not a literal translation. Literally, the text says that they were eating with "κοινος" (koinos) hands. (Some of you may have heard of a related word, "κοινωνία" (koinonia), a word used to describe Christian fellowship and community.) In another context, it might be merely descriptive ... they were eating with "common" hands ... "ordinary" hands ... hands like anybody else's ... hands like yours or mine.

And if I'm on to something here, then Jesus might be saying that our "common hands" are not the problem. Jesus says elsewhere that we're supposed to be *un*common folks, to live differently among our neighbors. And yet *here* Jesus is saying, I think, that our "common hands" (and bodies) are not the problem. Take a look inside, take stock of your heart, to see what's wrong.

And Jesus is pretty blunt – even disturbingly graphic – in how he makes the point. So let me read again what Jesus says, but I want use hear Eugene Peterson's version – and I want to add back in some of the verses we skipped this morning:

Jesus called the crowd together again and said, “Listen now, all of you — take this to heart. It’s not what you swallow that pollutes your life; it’s what you vomit — that’s the real pollution.”

When he was back home after being with the crowd, his disciples said, “We don’t get it. Put it in plain language.”

Jesus said, “Are you being willfully stupid? Don’t you see that what you swallow can’t contaminate you? It doesn’t enter your heart but your stomach, works its way through the intestines, and is finally flushed.” ...

“It’s what comes out of a person that pollutes: obscenities, lusts, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, depravity, deceptive dealings, carousing, mean looks, slander, arrogance, foolishness — all these are vomit from the heart. *There is the source of your pollution.*”

[Mark 7:14-23 (*The Message*)]

All of which is to say that our “common hands” – and feet and bodies – are not the problem. Our God-given hands are plenty good enough to do the work God puts before us.

No, it's our all-too-common hearts – our complacent, ordinary, willing- to-be-like-everyone-else hearts – that cheapen life for ourselves and everyone around us. Without some sort of heart transplant, we remain content to be like everyone else, critical of those with whom we disagree, quick to lash out at those who offend ...to be petty, at best, a caricature of our high calling.

I began this morning, with a joke about a woman who goes to heaven after she dies. But the point of this morning’s gospel, of course, is how we are to live here on this common earth.

I see something of the same point threading through all of our other readings this morning. There’s that weird and wonderful reading from the Song of Solomon. We read it at weddings fairly often, as it happens, as an affirmation that our God-given bodies are good for making love – and that’s a good thing.

But I’m going to let James have the last word today. It’s rather a surprising twist. As books of the Bible, it’s hardly anyone’s favorite. Martin Luther hated it; he called it the “epistle of straw.”

But straw has its uses. And I think there are hints in this passage that suggest a way we might put Jesus’ teaching into a spiritual practice.

The letter calls on us to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” In our divided and divisive world, a world in which we too easily listen just to find a weakness in the other’s argument, a chance to pounce ... in our bombastic worlds, being “quick to listen ... slow to speak ... slow to anger” is an *un*common notion of how to live.

And the key, I think, as James puts it, to figuring out how to be uncommon in the midst of a common world is to “welcome” the “implanted word.” That’s a spiritual practice.

And it’s such a rich and evocative image. Look deeply inside to discover what we too-easily fail to see, that we are, each of us, at the center of our being, created in God’s image. The rather more commonplace is to fail to see that deep holiness within – or, as it says, to “immediately forget” what we truly see in the mirror of God’s love for us as soon as we step away.

So look deeply to seek and to see the divine spark within. Hold on to that vision as you venture forth, stepping away from the mirror.

And then seek and serve the divine spark in everyone you next encounter.

For we are not called to be snooty Episcopalians, content to worry about who knows which fork to use. No, we’re still called to be uncommon people, leading holy lives, the kind of people who care and lift others up rather than even hold or put anyone down, to put our common bodies to use in order to live uncommon lives.

Or, as James says:

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 ... is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

ⁱ Adapted from *A Prairie Home Companion Pretty Good Joke Book* (Highbridge Company, St. Paul, Minnesota, 2000), p. 65.

ⁱⁱ Elisabeth Johnson @ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3758#post_comments and Janet Hunt @ <http://words.dancingwiththeword.com/2015/08/on-hand-washing-shells-and-our-oh-so.html>.