

The 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)  
August 29, 2021  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9  
Psalm 15  
James 1:17-27  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

*Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: the church is open at [www.trinitybend.org](http://www.trinitybend.org).*

Even before COVID-19, it was already a good idea for us to wash our hands.

The signs telling us to do so were in every restroom of every restaurant we ever went to: a strong suggestion for everyone; a mandate for employees. Our parents drilled this into us, telling us to wash our hands after going to the bathroom and before coming to the dinner table.

I suppose that's why handwashing, at least, has not been called into question this past year.



Even so, I'm almost surprised. After all, just about everything else, it seems – vaccines and wearing masks and physical-distancing in public places – has been politicized these days. Thankfully, at least nobody seems keen to question the need to wash our hands.

But if someone ever *does* decide to oppose handwashing, I hope they don't read this morning's gospel. We just heard about how some religious folk were upset that some of Jesus' followers didn't always wash their hands before eating. And Jesus pretty much says it's not important.

The Lutheran commentator Brian Stoffregen once imagined what a child might make of it after hearing this story in Sunday School:

Mom: Go and wash your hands before supper.

Child: NO! Jesus says we don't have to.

Mom: I don't care what Jesus says. Go and wash your hands if you expect to eat ...  
And use soap! <sup>i</sup>

Maybe that's far-fetched. And yet some of those who object to mask mandates and vaccines sound – to my ears anyhow – like whining children throwing tantrums. And I find it especially disturbing when they claim that their religious faith is at issue. *NO! Jesus says we don't have to.*

So I guess I just want to put it out there that I don't think this morning's gospel offers any medical advice. But I also think that if Jesus *did* weigh in on our current times, he'd tell us to wash our hands and wear masks and get the life-saving vaccine.

I'd better unpack that a bit.

When some Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem take Jesus and his followers to task, the issue is not good hygiene. They're worried about identity and what it means to keep the faith.

In some ways, this was nothing new. Judaism was never monolithic.

The teachings of Moses, as we heard in our first reading, were deemed a gift from God for the benefit of the People of God. It's what set them apart from their neighbors. But from the beginning, the People of God wrestled – and disagreed – about what was most important.

Jesus is caught in that tension in this morning's gospel, and he quotes Isaiah to take a side. From the opening chapter, Isaiah proclaims that God abhors the worship of a people who offer their sacrifices and their prayers but neglect the needs of the oppressed and the vulnerable – the orphans, the widows, and the immigrants in their midst. Isaiah insists that's what matters most.

We heard the same in this morning's psalm, as well. It seems that abiding with God, so far as the Psalmist is concerned, has nothing to do with religious observances and everything to do with honesty, caring for friend and neighbor, never doing wrong, never going back on one's word, giving to others without hope of getting anything back, and protecting the rights of the innocent.

My point is to say that this morning's gospel isn't a Christian critique of Judaism; it's a moment in an ongoing debate *within* Judaism about what it means to be holy.

That's a point we easily miss this morning. As Mark tells us about this disagreement, he tries to explain why the whole matter of washing hands mattered at all. This is what he adds:

*For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders ...*

And then Mark elaborates beyond the washing of hands to talk of cups and pots and kettles. This, he says, is what “all the Jews” do.

But it’s not true. We know it’s not. Mark goes too far. After all, the whole debate that day began when some out-of-town Jews see what some of Jesus’ disciples – all them also Jews – are doing.

It’d be better to say:

*For the Pharisees, and all the **Judeans**, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders ...*

I think that would be a better translation. And I think it better makes the point that this isn’t a critique of Judaism, as such. It’s more a geographical dispute. It’s a conflict between resident Jews from the rural northern region of Galilee and the big-city elite from the capital city down south. With their privilege and their power and their wealth, they come up to Galilee and try to undermine the way things are done up there; they presume to tell these backwater people how they should do things too.

But their strict adherence to these traditions was a privilege not everyone could afford. They had time. They had access to the water needed to wash their hands and everything in the kitchen. Heck, they could afford extra dishes – one set for dairy and the other for everything else. But if you’re poor – if you live out in the rural areas, where ritually clean food isn’t always available and both time and wealth are in short supply – well, it’s just not possible. And frankly, their traditions were probably not that important in Galilee in any event.

The folks from Jerusalem say these traditions are fundamental to who they are. But Jesus disagrees. He insists that what’s fundamental to who we are is table fellowship ... and kindness, and how we treat one another. They’ll know who we are by our love, not by our handwashing.

Jesus never says it’s wrong to wash your hands. He just says there are bigger issues at stake. Of greater concern than personal piety, Jesus says, is the common good. More needed than striving to keep oneself clean is striving to care for others, especially those most vulnerable.

Our parents taught us to wash our hands. Even before COVID-19, we already knew it was a good idea. Our parents taught us that much. And at their best, our parents taught us more important lessons besides.

This past week, an article in *The Atlantic* reminded me of something many of us – maybe most of us – were taught when we were growing up. The author, Silas House, describes how he grew up being taught to do what he could for others:

As a child in eastern Kentucky, I often helped my grandmother work in her large garden, lush with tomatoes, beans, okra, potatoes, and peppers. Granny was born in 1909, 62 years before me. As we hoed the long rows, I loved to hear her stories of living through the Great Depression and World War II. During the hard times of the 1930s, she said, neighbors banded together to help one another, pooling money to assist a destitute family or leaving food on the doorstep of a widow raising several children. While many fought fascism overseas, she and others saved rubber and tinfoil for the war effort and scrimped on food because of rationing on sugar, butter, gasoline, coal, and oil. “Not everybody was selfless, but most of us tried our best,” she told me as the heat bugs screamed around us. “That’s what you should always do.”

My own parents put these words into action. They cut corners so that they could help less fortunate kids from my school, or our church. I was taught to sacrifice my own comfort for the good of others, whether it be by volunteering my seat to elders in a crowded waiting room, letting a pregnant woman go in front of me in the grocery line, or giving half of my sandwich to a hungry classmate. I may not have always lived up to these standards, but I was taught to try. I’m sure I’m not alone. Sacrificing for the common good was something most of us were taught when I was growing up. Just a few decades later, I’m seeing people in my hometown, and all over the country, thinking only of themselves. They’re not just unwilling to make sacrifices for others during a pandemic; they’re angry about being asked to. <sup>ii</sup>

He goes on to lament the current state of things. “Refusing to sacrifice for the common good,” he says, isn’t an issue for only some states or regions, it’s “an American problem.”

I think Jesus might disagree slightly. I think Jesus warns us that it’s a more universal problem of the human heart too much inclined to put personal prerogatives and rights ahead of the needs of others.

But I think Jesus would still hold out hope, all the same.

For the human heart also still beats with compassion. It seems a good bet to me that Jesus still looks for us to have compassionate hearts concerned for more than personal rights and freedoms, compassionate hearts that flow with concern for our neighbors, for children too young to be vaccinated, and for the most vulnerable among us.

Maybe you don’t need to hear me say any of this. But maybe it’s good to be reminded to look to our own hearts called not merely to keep ourselves clean from contamination, but always to do that which speaks of our love of God, our love of our neighbors, as well as our love of self.

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<sup>i</sup> Brian Stoffregen, “Exegetical Notes,” @ <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark7x1.htm>.

<sup>ii</sup> Silas House @ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/08/some-americans-no-longer-believe-in-the-common-good/619856/>.