

Grace to you and Peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Pastor Ellen sent me a sermon that she used a few years ago when we had the Gospel lesson we are using today. She told me to “make it my own”, so here goes.

I suspect that most of you are familiar with Pig-Pen, a major character in the Peanuts comic strip created by Charles Schulz. Constantly followed by a cloud of dirt, Pig-Pen was simply a dust magnet. In fact, Charles Schulz once called Pig-Pen a “human soil bank.” Our son Nate, whom some of you know from the years when he, Laura and the 3 kids attended Faith, was the opposite of Pig-Pen. He didn't enjoy the fun of swilling in the dirt when he and his brother Ben were young. In fact, he'd constantly try to keep clean, often licking his hands (demonstrate) to clean away any dirt on him. It drove us crazy. Finally, Connie found the cure. She made a mud pit in the backyard in Lima one mild day in late February when he was 5 ½. She announced that “we're going to play in the mud.” (show the two slides) That took care of the keeping clean problem.

Pig-Pen and my son came to mind as I studied today's gospel lesson. The gospel writer tells of this argument between Jesus and the Pharisees, an argument about washing hands before eating. And, quite frankly, I think I probably would have sided with the Pharisees. You see, I wanted my kids to have clean hands when they came to the table for dinner. And now, the same thing for the grandkids. I want to have clean hands when I eat dinner. If I am eating out, or in today's Covid situation, picking up food to take home, I want the people who are making my food and serving me to have clean hands. In fact, with Covid still a problem and the flu season just around the corner, **many** of us often use hand sanitizers and wash our hands to keep from passing germs as we try to prevent the spread of disease. Having clean hands is just good hygiene.

Today's gospel reading tells us the Pharisees confronted Jesus, asking why his disciples ate with defiled, dirty hands. Now, truthfully, the hand washing ritual, part of a purity code system, probably had some roots in maintaining cleanliness and probably did exist for **some** good reasons. However, for the Pharisees, it had become a **required religious** ritual, one that was much more important than the inner attitude of the heart. Having reduced religion to "doing the right thing" and carefully following established

rules, these ritual specialists seemed to find strict enforcement of purity codes **more** important than having one's heart in the right place. With their arduous adherence to purity codes, they created sharp social boundaries which, in turn, became a means of excluding people they considered dirty and contaminated. While the Pharisees washed and maintained clean hands, they simply did **not** have clean hearts. They suffered from a form of heart disease where they had lost touch with the very **heart** of God.

So, Jesus begins addressing the nature of people's hearts – the Pharisees, the disciples and ours. Jesus knows that, for the Pharisees, observance of ritual, tradition and, quite frankly, the way they had always done things, had become more important than **compassion and love**. Jesus responds by quoting the prophet Isaiah. Listen to the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases Jesus' response in *The Message*.

Jesus answered, "Isaiah was right about frauds like you, hit the bull's-eye in fact:

'These people make a big show of saying the right thing,  
but their heart isn't in it.  
They act like they are worshiping me,  
but they don't mean it.  
They just use me as a cover  
For teaching whatever suits their fancy,  
Ditching God's command  
And taking up the latest fads.'

Now, I have to say that rituals **are** important in our lives and in the life of the faith community. And, Jesus is not telling anyone to do away with ritual and tradition. I make the bed every day, I try to use our elliptical machine regularly, I vacuum the floors when needed. Connie says that's not her thing, by the way. However, there needs to be a balance in regard to ritual and a life of faith. Yet, sometimes I do wonder if we **also** suffer from the same form of heart disease. Do we suffer from this kind of heart disease when our rituals become antiseptic and hollow, when they are not vehicles of the love and grace of God? Do we suffer from this kind of heart disease when **we** create social boundaries within our culture and divorce ourselves from the outcasts of society, from issues of the poor, the homeless and the forgotten? The "Others?"

Theologian, Daniel Clendenin, in his weekly blog asks this question:

*"....What "outcasts" do I sanctimoniously spurn as impure, unclean, dirty, contaminated, and, in my mind, far from God? The mentally ill, people who have married four or five times, wealthy executives, welfare recipients, people who hold conservative political opinions, people who hold liberal political opinions..... How have I distorted the self-sacrificing, egalitarian love of God into self-serving, exclusionary elitism? What boundaries do I wrongly build or might I bravely shatter?"*

Following Jesus' response to the Pharisees, he does something quite interesting. He intentionally begins addressing the disciples, and that includes you and me. Jesus begins to take us to a much deeper place by teaching even more about the human heart which, by the way, in the Bible is a metaphor for one's whole being, for the total person. He begins to explain his teaching about the human heart and the problem of evil. Again, to quote Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message*, Jesus says, "It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life." Jesus describes **this heart disease** as something that comes from **within**. He is talking about the stuff that **originates** in the human heart. Jesus says it is not what we touch and what goes into us that makes us unclean. Instead, it is what is deep in our hearts and then comes out of our mouths through the harmful and hurtful things we say, and through the harmful actions we take - this is what is unclean. This is the stuff that pollutes, the stuff that ruins relationships and destroys community.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection were all about addressing the human heart, the totality of our beings. And, the gospel good news is that Jesus turns the purity code system upside down and inside out when he teaches about a radically new social vision. Instead of hearts that pollute,

Jesus announces that, through him, our hearts are **transformed**. Through Jesus' life, ministry and death, he introduces a radical alternative to community. He proclaimed his vision of a new community where the **heart** is the **source** of compassion - compassion for all – even those we don't like and those we might consider dirty and unclean. Through this vision of a new community, there is **not** a focus on external compliance to purity codes. No, the focus is on an internal compassion for all. And, Jesus calls us to live into this vision of community – one that is **not** shaped by rules of purity, but by the gift of compassion. (Marcus Borg)

In conclusion, as I think about the world today, I have to wonder if we who make up the body of Christ, have too often been shaped by the rules and ideas of purity. Isn't it interesting that, in the person of Jesus, God intentionally enters into the depth of **our** darkness and the dirt of **our** lives, to love us as we are and to change us from within by changing our **hearts**? Just maybe, as we love others and welcome them into community, we need to be **less** focused on cleanliness and be a bit **more** willing to get our hands dirty.