

Welcome and Announcements: August 16, 2020

Prelude: *My Faith Has Found a Resting Place*

My great Physician heals the sick, the lost He came to save

Gathering Around God's Word

Opening Prayer: A Prayer of Confession from the Prayers of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand

There are times when I talk too much.
There are times when I repeat things which I have no right to repeat.
I pass on a story which may not be entirely true
or add my own embroidered flourish to a tale in the telling.
O God who always listens, forgive me.

Help me remember to keep a deliberate
and constant check on my tongue.
Keep safe within me the hurts and secrets that others have shared,
for they trusted me, and I was glad of that trust.
Keep safe within me the confidences of children,
lest they be hurt by my crass joking over their tender moments.
Keep safe within me those safe disclosures of weakness and fear
shared in a moment of intimate vulnerability by my spouse
as a further expression of love for me.

Keep safe within me all those communications
which were entrusted to me for safekeeping.

Help me to listen, as you do Lord.
Help me to use my ears more than my mouth.
With your help, Lord, may I never again hear myself betraying a confidence
or breaching a trust.
Instead, transform me, Lord, into a listening, trustworthy friend.

Amen.

Opening Hymn: *Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord*

1. Take Thou our minds, dear Lord, we humbly pray;
Give us the mind the Christ each passing day;
Teach us to know the truth that sets us free;
Grant us in all our thoughts to honor Thee.

2. Take Thou our hearts, O Christ, they are Thine own;
Come Thou within our souls and claim Thy throne;
Help us to shed abroad Thy deathless love;
Use us to make the earth like heaven above.

Scripture: Exodus 30: 17-21; Psalm 41:1-4; Matthew 15:1-20

Exodus 30:17-21

¹⁷The LORD spoke to Moses: ¹⁸You shall make a bronze basin with a bronze stand for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it; ¹⁹with the water Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet. ²⁰When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to make an offering by fire to the LORD, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. ²¹They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die: it shall be a perpetual ordinance for them, for him and for his descendants throughout their generations.

Psalm 141:1-4

¹I call upon you, O LORD; come quickly to me;
give ear to my voice when I call to you.
²Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.
³Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD;
keep watch over the door of my lips.
⁴Do not turn my heart to any evil,
to busy myself with wicked deeds
in company with those who work iniquity;
do not let me eat of their delicacies.

Matthew 15:1-20

15 Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” ³He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ⁵But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. ⁶So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. ⁷You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

⁸‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁹in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”

¹⁰ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶ Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Sermon: Wash Your Hands; Watch Your Mouth; Change Your Heart

Responding to God’s Word

Prayer of the People and the Lord’s Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Offering – Requirement, Sacrifice, Gratitude

Response: *Doxology*

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heav’nly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Sending Us Out to Be God's Word in the World

Closing Hymn: My Faith Looks Up to Thee

1. My faith looks up to Thee,
Thou Lamb of Calvary,
Savior divine:
Now hear me as I pray,
Take all my guilt away,
O let me from this day
Be wholly Thine!

2. May Thy rich grace impart
Strength to my fainting heart,
My zeal inspire;
As Thou hast died for me,
O may my love to Thee
Pure, warm, and changeless be,
A living fire!

3. While life's dark maze I tread,
And griefs around me spread,
Be Thou my guide;
Bid darkness turn to day,
Wipe sorrow's tears away,
Nor let me ever stray from Thee aside.

4. When ends life's transient dream,
When death's cold, sullen stream,
Shall o'er me roll,
Blest Savior, then, in love,
Fear and distrust remove;
O bear me safe above,
A ransomed soul!

Charge and Benediction

Wash your hands. Watch your mouth. Change your heart.

Postlude: All Creatures of Our God and King

All ye who are of tender heart, forgiving others take your part, O sing ye, Alleluia! Ye who long pain and sorrow bear, Praise God and on Him cast your care! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

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August 16, 2020

Wash Your Hands, Watch Your Mouth, Change Your Heart

This whole reading from Matthew's gospel is about contempt. Contempt between the Pharisees and Jesus, then contempt between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. We too live in a world like this where there are competing interpretations of tradition – often causing conflict. Our contemporary Christian world is not of one mind, and neither was the Jewish world of Matthew's gospel.

The text probably has as much or more to say about the axes to grind in ancient Judaism around the time of Matthew's writing as it did about what Jesus literally said (or didn't say) to the Pharisees. After the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., much of the temple tradition – like hand washing – was likely being called into question. Was the purpose of religion to serve God IN THE TEMPLE, or was it to be united as a people outside the temple? The choice was thrust upon them. The temple was destroyed by Roman armies. There was nothing to go back to. Up until this time, God's presence was known in the temple, through a veiled entryway to the holy of holies, where only certain priests were allowed to enter during very specific times of the year.

As we consider what's going on in our own world, we could ask similar questions about our own edifices and institutions built to house religion. Is it our religious mandate to sit in pews and sing hymns, or is it something else? That's a really scary question - mostly because I enjoy having a pulpit to preach from and benefit from the traditions that have been passed down to me. I want to have the familiar structures and worldly comforts of potluck lunches and casual

conversation, and yet I am drawn to how Jesus is calling us to deepen our commitment to one another through both our words and our actions.

I get the feeling that this text may have a very powerful word for our life together today, so let's walk through what I see as its three movements – wash your hands, watch your words, change your heart.

When I first started reading and studying this text this week, I was right there on the same page with the Pharisees. Not washing your hands before you eat is gross, extra gross here in COVID pandemic-land. In fact, I want to tell Jesus and his band of non-hand washing disciples to wash their hands, put on their masks, get 6 feet apart, and douse themselves with sanitizer. Might as well these days be breaking commandments if not traditions by not following the rules of COVID preparation. I'm all in with them. Judy, our beloved and sainted nurse of Ashland Presbyterian Church, had it right, and also would have sided with the Pharisees on this particular point: Wash your hands, wash your hands, wash your hands.

But what's going on here has far less to do with hygiene than it has to do with RITUAL purity. The Pharisees and scribes were the only ones who could get clean enough, be pure enough to interact with God in the Temple. Everyone else was forbidden. Access to God could easily be denied. Basically, by dismissing Jesus and his disciples' hand washing routine was to tell them they weren't good enough to be leaders in the religion, not clean enough, not pure enough, not "clergy" material. It was contempt against them as the outsiders, the ones who were not "Temple Jews" but outsider Jews. At the time of this writing, a full Jewish/Christian split hadn't happened yet. Matthew was writing about the internal strife of the Jewish world – the kind we also know as we get into our own Christian messes about who has doctrinal correctness, moral purity, or insider connections.

And Jesus engages this debate with a contemptuous retort of his own. This is classic social media arguing here. The Pharisees and scribes dismiss him for breaking *tradition* by not washing his hands, and he fights back saying they break COMMANDMENTS by not honoring their fathers and mothers. His disciples might not be following tradition, but they didn't write off their parents, speaking with unkindness, and taking any support of them they might have had and donating that money to their own religious causes instead. He was upping the game, making it clear that the disagreement was mutual, and that he saw their hypocrisy as something far worse than his own. He called out their self-righteous piety, and told them that they could wash their hands all they wanted, it was the words coming out of their mouths that would condemn and defile them.

Well, now I'm back to being on Jesus' side. It infuriates me when I see church insiders substituting their own human biases for religious truth and dismissing God's commands to love one another. Jesus is livid. He calls out their blindness, and condemns how they lead others astray with their teaching. Jesus goes so far as to say that what goes into anyone's mouth from their hands, gets digested and winds up in the sewer. But that's not what is disgraceful and defiling. It's harsh and evil words coming out of someone's heart that defile a person by their evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, and slander. Watch your mouth – or it will ruin you – Jesus seems to be saying here.

He's not wrong. We wound each other with our words and intentions. It takes corruption of the heart to call forth evil, ruin relationships, steal, and lie. Seems like a much bigger religious ask to watch your mouth than to wash your hands. Jesus was an outsider Jew. He envisioned a ministry far beyond the Temple traditions. He was already out there healing, feeding, and lifting up the downwardly mobile at every turn. The differences between the two kinds of religious

interpretation were causing a rub – during Jesus’ lifetime, and particularly as the Jewish world was figuring out its identity post-Exodus, post-Exile, and now post-Temple. You can be the kind of religious person who cares about tradition and institutional purity OR you can be the kind of religious person who cares about creating compassionate community. We human beings love our dichotomies, and this is one that still feels so very familiar to us. Are we associated with the traditional institutional church or with the “on the ground” ministry of Jesus Christ? Maybe it’s a little of column A and a little of column B.

Which brings me to the third segment of our story. We’ve already set up our “sides” so to speak. There’s the entitled, privileged Pharisees and scribes who care about purity, and there’s the hippie Jesus-y side that cares about the discrimination of the marginalized.

Enter the Canaanite woman. She has no rightful place in this Jewish fight. She’s shouting – out of desperation – because she needs help. She’s losing hold of the end of her rope. Her daughter is possessed by a demon, and in a last attempt for her daughter’s well-being, she imagines that Jesus might be able to help her. She recognizes and calls upon Jesus’ rightful Jewish title as the Son of David. If you follow Matthew’s logic, it is Jesus’ connection to David that makes it even possible that he could be the Messiah. So after trying to ignore her, without success, Jesus makes a scandalous remark we, the readers, can hardly see coming. He says to her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” This? After he’s just finished scandalizing the Pharisees for how they use their words?

How easily we could miss the context of this passage if we don’t read this text starting from verse 1 of this chapter and following it through! All my life I’ve heard sermons justifying Jesus’ behavior as a test for her, or commending the Canaanite woman for her bravery and persistence. Either way – something is missing. The set up for this story is the argument between

Jesus and the Pharisees over “right” religious interpretation. Is it tradition? Is it commandments? Is it purity? Is it justice and love? Let’s go one step bigger here. As religious children, first, we learn the importance of washing our hands, then we realize the importance of watching our mouths, but to truly enter into an understanding of God’s unimaginably full sense of grace for the whole world, we HAVE to change our hearts. We have to be transformed, completely.

Jesus is truly looking like the jerk here. Immediately after his own holier-than-thou speech about the importance of compassionate words, here he is ignoring, dismissing, and berating this woman – because she’s not one of the in-group. The argument that, up to this point, was fully internal has now crossed an important line. Jesus may be sent to the lost sheep of Israel. He might think it’s unfair to take their food and throw it to the dogs. But she teaches him that God’s compassion is much bigger than that, “But sir, even the dogs gather the crumbs from under the master’s table.”

When our world becomes too small, too internal, and too self-important, God grants us opportunities to glimpse an even bigger vision of God’s holy Kingdom (as Matthew would call it). There were arguments among the Jews during Matthew’s time period. The same kinds of arguments are well known in the Christian world – and tend to repeat themselves generation upon generation. And then a Canaanite woman shows up, in need, to remind us that faithfulness is not solely the property of the correctly religious. God doesn’t “live in” the church. God is not confined to correct words about who God is and what God commands. The Spirit of the Living God is found anywhere and everywhere. It takes a changed heart to see it. Jesus was moved by the Canaanite woman’s story. After accusing others of blind leadership, his eyes were opened by her faith, and therefore he shared his healing power with her daughter.

Wash your hands. Our traditions are often the entry-point to religious understanding. We have our own “cleansing” rituals that are important to us. The font reminds us that we are baptized into grace, and at the table we form community by eating the bread of life and drinking the cup of forgiveness. But to base religion solely on right ritual won’t ever be enough.

Watch your mouth. Justice and love come from caring about others in deep and sustaining ways. We cannot forget those on the edges of our communities. We are commanded BY GOD to love our neighbors, to love ourselves, to welcome strangers and treat enemies not as dogs but as God’s children. That’s how we will show our love for God. Religion must carry these qualities or else it will lose its impact on the world.

Change Your Heart. Even if we are practicing our tradition and serving our community, people of faith are called to remain open to new and surprising opportunities to go even deeper. No one, I repeat, no one is outside of the possibility of knowing God and offering us a deeper picture of who God is. This is what we have to pay attention to right now. Our usual rituals have been disturbed by a world-wide pestilence, our sense of compassion has been strained as our eyes are open to how deeply some have experienced pain and oppression in our culture, so it is right now that we are primed to have an encounter with an outlier that changes our heart and transforms our being. When you are ready for it, your very own “Canaanite Woman” encounter is bound to happen. The person you LEAST expect to open your eyes or give you a new sense of purpose will show up and change everything. When that happens – I’d love to hear your story. Amen.