

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

August 30, 2015

“Sanitizer for the Heart”

Dear friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How clean are your hands today? Did you wash your hands after using the restroom this morning? According to a study from Michigan State University, 95 percent of people wash their hands incorrectly. According to researchers, the "right way to wash your hands" is to wet your hands with clean, running water (warm or cold) and apply soap. Rub them together to make a lather while scrubbing them well, making sure you get the backs of the hands, between the fingers and under the nails. Keep this up for 20 seconds -- the CDC recommends singing the "Happy Birthday" song twice -- and after, rinse under running water, before drying with a clean towel or air dryer.

For this study, researchers observed that Thirty-three percent of people didn't use soap, while 10 percent skipped hand-washing entirely. The average hand-washing time was 6 seconds, far below the CDC's recommended duration. Men were much worse than women, the researchers observed. Fifteen percent of men didn't wash at all, compared with 7 percent of women. When they did wash, 50 percent of men used soap, compared to 79 percent of women. Does that make any of you women want to avoid sharing the peace with the men next to you? Yikes. I'm sure all of the men here used soap this morning. Right?

Our Gospel reading for today is about handwashing. The Pharisees from Jerusalem - those who are the official keepers of true religion - are watching Jesus and his disciples. They do not take offense with what Jesus has been saying, but they do mount an indirect attack on him. They accuse his disciples of ritual uncleanness. The word that is translated as "defiled" means, literally, "common" or "secular." What they are upset about is that the disciples haven't ritually prepared themselves as they should before eating, and so are acting like unconsecrated people - that is, like Gentiles. That was about the worst insult you could give a Jew of that day. The idea is that God can only come to those who have first ritually purified themselves and prepared themselves for his coming.

The word here for “wash” is very interesting here in this text. The word used for "wash" is the same word translated elsewhere as "baptize." What Jesus is saying, in other words, is that the Pharisees baptize their hands in order to make themselves pure in God's eyes. But Jesus calls for another kind of baptism, a baptism of the heart, an immersion into the life of God. And that is the heart of the problem Jesus is getting at. It's a problem that is still with us.

We struggle with this today when we see a Christian person who publicly talks the talk - but doesn't walk the walk. The Josh Duggar scandal has erupted in recent days, for example. These days, his hands aren't looking very clean. How about his heart? I'm not so sure, but I'll let God handle that.

The Pharisees had their religion down pat. They knew all the rules, they did all the right things. They were wonderful examples of religion. You couldn't find a more moral group of people than they were. And in church, they knew all the right moves. They had the language down, they knew their Bibles, they knew how to do religion. What more could you want?

But there is a great difference between religion and faith. I remember a time when a woman who had no church experience at all came into the doors of my last congregation one Sunday morning to worship with us. That is a hard thing for most people to do. Most people outside of the church really have no idea what worship is all about, and the idea of coming into church and finding a bunch of holy people there is honestly really quite scary. After church, I talked to her, and she expressed this anxiety to me. She said it was one of the hardest things she'd ever done and, afterwards, she wasn't sure whether she belonged there. "I just looked around and saw all these holy people with their bright, shining faces, and I knew I didn't belong," she told me. I wondered out loud who she was looking at, because, of course, I knew these folks quite a bit differently. Week after week I had heard these people as they talked about their struggles, their questions, their doubts. And I am not immune either. Faith is always messy. It isn't about the bright, shining faces of saints who have all the answers - we never do. And that idea offends religionists. They think that everything should be wrapped up in a neat little package and delivered to them.

Faith requires our leaning on God. Faith trusts that we are held in the hands of One who will not let us go. Faith acknowledges our weaknesses and reliance on God. The Pharisees didn't really need God, you see. They didn't have to rely on God. They only needed God's approval - and their rules, regulations, words, worship - all were designed to guarantee them God's approval.

Luther said that, in his early years, he also fell into that trap. He would go to confession several times a day, sometimes spending long periods of time trying to remember every sin, every possible thought that might be offensive, until his confessor finally told him, "Luther, sin boldly!" Can you imagine that! From a priest!

But that is Jesus' message to us today! What the disciples did wasn't earth-shattering. They forgot to wash their hands. They probably didn't think much about it. But what was important was their freedom to do that. It was the same freedom that allowed them later to look past some of the other restrictions of their religion, in light of the Gospel, and reach out to the "unclean," the

Gentiles. Because of that, the Gospel was made available to you. It was the same freedom that enabled some of our ancestors, many years later, to look through the Gospel and reinterpret it, to read God's grace in it and God's love for all humankind, and so declare that not only white men, but also white women, and black men and women, and men and women of whatever color or station in life are equal in God's eyes, and therefore should be equal in ours. It is a freedom that allows us to reinterpret the Gospel, the good news, in our own time and in the situations that we face.

Homosexuality has become a very touchy issue in the church - an issue that has caused some people to leave our church, and an issue that has caused division all over. Some folks want to put up walls composed of scripture passages, and so fence themselves in God's favor and keep their opponents out. Others want to build those same walls out of other passages to keep the first group out. There are a lot of people who are convinced that they have all the answers. But faith is messy thing. We don't have all of the answers - and I don't think we ever will. Meanwhile, we are called to live in the midst of the mess that faith creates; and the way that we do that is by trying to be faithful to our understanding of the Gospel, on the one hand, and cling to Christ with the other - because we may be wrong. But Christ gives us the freedom even to be wrong. What he does not give us, is the right to do harm to our brother or sister in faith who is also struggling to be faithful, who is also clinging to Christ.

That is why Jesus tells the Pharisees, "It is not what goes into a person that defiles him, but what comes out of his heart." We need to pay attention to our heart, to what is in there. We are called to have humility there - to realize that we are not God, that even some of the things that we hold dear may turn out, after all, to be wrong. For centuries people thought slavery was o.k. For many years, everyone with any sense knew that giving women equal rights was a bad idea - some still think so! We aren't God - we aren't supposed to be - so we don't know everything. So we need to be humble.

We need to have love there as well - the same kind of love that God has for us. Not the kind of love that says, "Yes, I love them, but" We need an unconditional love. "As God has loved you, so love one another," John declares. That's loving with extravagance.

And we need to have faith in there - faith that holds to the One who holds us, faith that relies only on Him, that rests in His love, His hands.

What do people find in the heart of this congregation today? What do visitors find when they enter these doors? Do they find a community of Christ that isn't concerned with how these strangers look, whether they are wearing the right clothes, whether they speak the language of Lutheranism, whether they stand up and sit down at the right time and their kids behave

properly? Do they find here a family that includes them, wherever they have been, whatever they have done, whoever they have been in the past or are now? Do they find unconditional love and acceptance here? What is in our heart?

What is in your heart today? Is your heart open today? Is it free - free to rest in God's arms, free to express His love, free to proclaim His wonderful grace? What is inside of you today?

May God give us the freedom to live boldly, to respond creatively and courageously to the great questions of our day; may God also give us the courage to make mistakes along the way, trusting that the end is still in his hands. May God give us the humility to admit our weakness and dependence on God's grace. Most of all, may God give us the strength to love one another, whatever our disagreements and divisions. May our hearts be filled with God's love, and may we share that love with the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.