

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-25

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Israelites, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. Let anyone with ears to hear listen. ... For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come; fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and *they* defile a person.

Comes a Time by the Grateful Dead

*There comes a time, when the blind man, takes your hand, says don't you see?
You gotta make it somehow, on a dream. You still believe, don't give it up.
You've got an empty cup, only love can fill.*

Been walking all morning, I went walking all night.
Can't see much difference, between the dark and the light.
I feel the wind, and I taste the rain.
Never in my mind to cause you so much pain.

*There comes a time, when the blind man, takes your hand, says don't you see?
You gotta make it somehow, on a dream. You still believe, don't give it up.
You've got an empty cup, only love can fill.*

Day by day, just letting in ride.
You get so far away from how it feels inside.
But you can't let go, cause you're afraid to fall.
But the day may come when you can't feel at all.

*There comes a time, when the blind man, takes your hand, says don't you see?
You gotta make it somehow, on a dream. You still believe, don't give it up.
You've got an empty cup, only love can fill.*

“What Is Clean and Unclean?”

Faith Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, NC

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There was an anthropologist named Mary Douglas who wrote a very influential book in the 1960s on dirt, called *Purity and Danger*. She studied human cultures all over the world and throughout history, and found that all cultures have this proclivity to distinguish between what is clean and unclean. “Dirt,” she pointed out, is actually a relative term, and it is somewhat ambiguously defined in each culture. It’s essentially “matter that is perceived as being out of place.” So, earth, for example isn’t “dirty” when it is out on your front lawn. But when it gets inside of your home, it becomes dirt. Shoes are clean when they are on the floor inside of your closet, but shoes outside the closet are not clean.... they need to be cleaned up.

It may be hard for us to see how relative and arbitrary our standards for cleanliness are, especially since most of us like to think that they are rooted in rational considerations of what is healthy and safe. Deep down, we believe that what is “dirty” actually poses some threat to us, which is why we have such a visceral, knee-jerk reaction to it. When we see something that we think is “unclean,” we have an almost automatic response: “ewww!” That feeling of disgust is a core survival emotion, which helps us to stay alive by causing us to avoid or expel things that are harmful or toxic to our system.

And sometimes the things we react to with disgust are, in fact, potentially harmful to us. But this is not always the case. That discrepancy becomes even clearer when we start to look at some of the cleanliness taboos of *other* cultures – like for example, many of the laws of ancient Israel. We can understand the traditions around washing your hands and cups before meals, which we know is one of the most important things you can do to ward off disease and death.

But what about those laws against wearing cloth made out of two different types of fabric? What’s up with *that*?

Much of what we consider “dirty” is, on a deeply instinctual level, based our perceptions of where things belong, and what sorts of things belong together. Remember those games you played as a kid, “circle the thing that doesn’t belong”? This impulse to classify and categorize, and then to “clean everything up” so that it’s “nice and neat” is rooted in our culture’s collective wisdom about survival, which is part of the reason why those classifications tend to take on a moral dimension: soil *should* not be on our hands. Shoes *should* be in the closet. It starts to be perceived as part of some divine order. “Cleanliness is next to godliness,” right?

When things seem to be in their proper place, we get a deep feeling of peace, security, and safety. Everything is under control. "God is in his heaven and all is right with the world." Conversely, things that are perceived as being "out of place" – those things that cross categories or defy established classifications – make us feel anxious and out of sorts, giving us that instinctual feeling of danger. In many Asian cultures, for example, twilight is considered the most dangerous time of day, when you are most vulnerable to evil spirits. Many people will therefore refuse to go outside until it's neither day nor night.

The problem with this instinct is that it not only get applied to things, but also to people.

So, racism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia – *all* forms of segregation-based bigotry are rooted in this same basic instinctual need for safety through order and "cleanliness." Consider how the Nazis were able to justify the Holocaust by convincing massive numbers of people that Jews were "dirty." This is how concentrations camps could be perceived as a "good" – they were doing the work of "cleaning up" Germany. Here in the South, we know that the Jim Crow laws functioned in the same way. They were tied to notions of cleanliness. You couldn't have black people and white people drinking out of the same water fountain, using the same bathrooms, or swimming in the same pools. Even today, members of the newly "re-branded" KKK will try to argue that they aren't "racist" – they aren't against the *existence* of other races... they just think that everyone should be separated, and stay on their own continent.

See? Nice and neat.

As Christians, we often love to caricature or even vilify the Pharisees as being so obsessive about their purity laws and their petty notions of cleanliness and order. But the reality is that *all* people tend to operate out of this basic instinctual mentality, including, I would argue, most Christians. We often tend to define for ourselves what is "sacred" and what is "secular," trying to separate out what is "Christian" from what is of "the world." We talk about certain things as if they were proper and pious, and others as though they were "inappropriate" for church.

As a singer and a songwriter, I can tell you that this is *especially* true when it comes certain types of music and art. Many people think they have some vague idea of what "sacred music" is, or "Christian music." But these categories are actually very ambiguous and arbitrary. Christians are notorious for creating their own subcultures of art, music, film, and many groups have developed their own television and radio networks, attempting to quarantine themselves off from "the world" in order to ensure that they will only ever see or hear material that is considered "clean."

But what exactly makes something “clean” from a Christian perspective? According to Jesus in our Gospel reading today, *nothing* outside of us should be called “unclean!” Jesus tells us that it’s our own inner attitudes and intentions that define for us what is clean and unclean. That’s because it’s our own perceptions that shape our experience of reality. Christians should be scandalized by *nothing* in this world, but instead must seek to encounter *everything* through the transfigured lens of an open mind and a pure heart. How are we free to do this? Because, as Jesus says: “there is nothing *going in* that can defile. Only the things that *come out* are what defile,” which is why racism, homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia, and all other forms of segregation-based bigotry are fundamentally incompatible with the Christian faith.

“Those who have ears to hear, listen.” That refrain we heard today in our reading is one that gets repeated *fifteen times* throughout the Scriptures – five times by Jesus himself. It points us to the fact that we have an opportunity in every moment to experience the Kingdom of God in our midst, and to see the world around us transfigured. The Gospels challenge us to find the face of Christ in everyone we meet, *particularly* in those people that our culture has labeled “dirty” or “unclean.” We are called not only to have eyes to see, but also ears to hear the Spirit’s echo in film, poetry, music of all genres... and yes, even in the wisdom of other religious traditions.

How many people recognized the song that I played earlier today? I’m hoping at least one person will be shocked when I tell you that it was a song by the Grateful Dead. And even those of you who might think that’s really cool probably know at least one person who, if you told them that your anthem at church today was a Grateful Dead song, would worry for your everlasting soul. That music isn’t appropriate for church, right?! That’s the music of “dirty” hippies!

But did you have “ears to hear” the lyrics? “There comes a time when the blind man takes your hand, says don’t you see? You still believe, don’t give it up. You’ve got an empty cup only love can fill.”

We can wash our hands and rinse out our cups, and put our shoes away, and listen to nice, clean Christian music for the rest of our lives. But we will never stumble into the Kingdom of God unless we understand that cleanliness is *not* godliness. Cleanliness is simply the effort to put things back where *we* think they belong, whereas true Godliness is realizing that in the Kingdom of God, *everything* belongs – and everyone. The things that do not belong, Jesus names them outright: murder, theft, greed, cheating, lies, hatred, objectification, pride. These are the things we need to “clean up.” And we don’t do that by trying to create some kind of external order that sanctifies from the outside-in. We have to manifest “cleanliness” from the inside-out. “Take the log out of your own eye,” Jesus says, “and *then* will you see clearly enough to wipe the speck from your neighbors.”

I encourage you, brothers and sisters, to walk back out into this world today undaunted and unafraid. Nothing and nowhere is off-limits for followers of Jesus. So look for him in the people you would least expect, and in the places you might think of as “dirty.” Listen for him in the stories you see at the movies, or the songs that you hear at a concert on a Friday night. Remember that each one of us is responsible for cultivating the purity of our own hearts, not through our judgment of what we think is clean *out there*, but through our inner awareness of what it means to be “clean” in here – a state of being marked by humility, sincerity, vulnerability, compassion and grace. When we take responsibility for our *own* perspectives, and for what *we* are manifesting in the world – and when we cultivate within ourselves those eyes to see and those ears to hear – then we will not only experience the presence of God everywhere we go, but we will *bring* God with us to everyone we meet. And I believe that then, and only then, we will begin to understand what Jesus meant when he said that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Amen.