

Mercy

How do we show that we've lined up our lives with God?

What marks us as people like that?

Isn't that the question at the heart of today's Gospel lesson?

Different folks answer this question in different ways.

The Pharisees answer it by insisting on very strict purity rules.

Rules that have them washing everything they eat with.

Hands and cups and pitchers and kettles.

All while condemning those who don't or won't.

Some of you Mom's may be thinking, "What's wrong with washing?"

Of course, the answer is "nothing," but this isn't about hygiene.

Germs weren't discovered yet.

It's about ritual.

So the cleaning must be done just so.

Using just the right amount of water.

Using the right kind of water.

The focus on outer actions, rather than inner intentions, leads many to equate the Pharisees with hypocrisy.

But we can't dismiss them that easily.

Like you and I, the Pharisees are complicated.

They have good reasons for doing what they do.

As you know, the Pharisees are lay people who take seriously God's command through Moses that the people of Israel are to be holy, just as God is holy.

And like us, where God requires an inch, we go a mile.

For example, while Jewish law only requires the priests to wash, and only before making a sacrifice to God; the Pharisees say:

"If we, as Moses says, are a nation of priests, then everyone should wash, and not just before a sacrifice, but before every meal."

In a time when the people of Israel are occupied by Rome and inundated by Greek culture, the Pharisees are, in many ways, a commendable group.

Trying their hardest to keep and grow a distinctly Jewish identity among the people of Israel.

This way, they remember who they are.

And who they are called to become.

All in the face of massive cultural challenges.

By washing, they mark themselves off as people faithful to God.

People deserving of God's blessing.

That kind of thinking is quite common today.

While 2000 years separates us from the Pharisees, we too are often fixated on purity.

Except rather than "purity," we call it "having the right doctrine" or "following our traditions."

Which is why we Episcopalians are sometimes referred to as the Republican Party at prayer.

We are morally upright and "good citizens" as conventionally defined.

But we are also, as a group, often slow to take on structures of economic and racial injustice.

We tend to support the military, no matter Jesus' warning about living and dying by the sword.

And while we don't mind helping the needy, we prefer the "deserving poor."

And then there are our Roman Catholic friends who aren't inclined to recognize non-Roman churches as full-fledged churches.

Calling us instead "ecclesial communities."

Not to mention other Christians who deny the whole idea of evolution.

While others try to collapse Christianity into a Leave it to Beaver family friendly cult that waves the flag of nationalism and is hostile to people from foreign lands.

Truth be told, each of us, sometimes quietly and sometimes loudly, are quite sure that we, not them, have the inside track with God.

We are, we whisper (silently to ourselves), a bit cleaner than all of the rest of them.

All of which is a reminder that modern Christianity shouldn't sneer too loudly at those Pharisees!

Of course, the truth is, we need traditions and rules and doctrines.

Without these things, there's no skin to hold the wine of our faith.

Without these things, we can't know who "we" are.

The problem isn't the traditions or rules or doctrines themselves.

The problem comes when we, like the Pharisees, substitute traditions and rules for the wild, unpredictable, challenging, merciful, cajoling, forgiving, insistent, and pregnant Spirit of the Living God!

We forget, to our peril, that God isn't interested in turning us into obedient robots.

Instead, God is always calling us out of, and beyond, who we think we are.

"God isn't crazy about the traditions we create and carefully protect.

That's because drawing lines separates us.

Good guys from bad guys.

Wheat from chaff.

Good fish from bad.

But God is a God who loves the bad and the good.

Because, when we see good and bad through the eyes of God, we're forced to acknowledge that it's all hopelessly intertwined.

Enmeshed.

Inseparable.

Which is why, thanks be to God, **untamed grace keeps pouring out into alien territory.**" (Don McCullough, paraphrased).

Jesus has a message for the outraged Pharisees today – and he has a message for us too:

"If you think that your rules or doctrines or traditions sum up the substance of the Living God, then your god is too small!"

Because, once we come to glimpse the unending yearning God has for all of creation, we begin to understand why Jesus, in mercy, crosses every barrier that separates us.

It's why he eats with prostitutes, tax collectors and Roman collaborators.

He's not in it for the purity.

He's in it to show us that, if you follow Jesus, you're gonna get dirty!

Roy Pearson says:

"The church is like a chimney sweep.

It can't do its job with clean hands.

And so cleanliness is not next to godliness.

Dirt is.

Dirt.

Pain.

Sorrow.

Prejudice.

Injustice.

Treachery."

These, and so much more, await the follower of Jesus.

We are constantly called by Jesus out of our easy chairs and onto the hard wooden benches, where sit our impoverished neighbors.

Our friends of different faiths.

Our children whose sexual orientation may differ from ours.

What Jesus seems to be getting at today is that we will find him just as often at the graffiti littered, urine soaked, bus stop — as in the sweet scented quiet solitude of the church pew.

Jesus meets us wherever we are.

I learned this week that the literal translation for the word “unclean” that we hear in today’s gospel doesn’t actually mean “dirty” or “impure.”

It simply means “ordinary.”

“Common.”

Which means the Pharisees’ concern is about separating the holy from the ordinary.

Religious people of every era seem fixated on this problem.

We find it so hard to believe that the holy is perfectly happy hanging out with the ordinary.

Yet religious people of every stripe are convinced that the ordinary contaminates the holy.

It’s an “outside - in” way of thinking.

It’s a way of thinking that leads us to seeing outsiders, those not “like us”, as dangerous, evil, a threat.

Just take a gander at the hysteria concerning our borders, as long-suffering Central Americans seeking safe harbor, are demonized.

But Jesus comes to show us that God dances precisely within the ordinary!

For Jesus, the holy CANNOT be contaminated by the ordinary.

The opposite is true!

The holy "contaminates" the ordinary!

Like yeast in flour.

Like seeds planted.

Like the Word becoming flesh.

Making all that is ordinary — holy.

This is an "inside - out" way of living.

Where the power of God scatters undeserved grace and unconditional love — freely, widely, even recklessly.

Remember the story of Babette's Feast?

The woman from Paris who won a fortune in the lottery, then spent every cent on a fabulous feast for a group of old nuns, whose traditions nearly strangled them to death?

The story concludes with this:

“People in their weakness and shortsightedness believe they must make all sorts of choices in this life.

And they tremble at the risks they think they’re taking.

But our choices of this and that don’t actually matter much.

The time will come when our eyes will be opened.

And we shall see that mercy — is infinite.

We need only wait for it.

Confidently.

Hopefully.

And then, receive it with gratitude.

Mercy imposes no conditions.

Everything we hope for is already granted.

Even everything we’ve rejected, is waiting for us.

Yes, we receive even that which we once rejected!

For mercy and truth shall meet.

Righteousness and bliss shall kiss.” paraphrased.

+amen