

Boundaries

How will people know that we belong to God?

What boundaries mark us off as the beloved of God?

That's 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, hands and cups and pitchers and kettles: and condemning those who don't do the same.

Now, for you moms who're thinking, "What's wrong with washing?" well, this isn't about hygiene; germs were a long way from being discovered.

It's about religious ritual – such that the cleaning is done in a very particular way, using a certain amount of water, holding your hand in just the right position.

Today, many folks look at the Pharisees as the very definition of hypocrisy.

But if you take a closer look, you can't dismiss them that easily.

Like you and I, the Pharisees are complicated, they have good explanations for doing what they do.

As you know, the Pharisees are not priests or clergy of any kind.

They 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 they are quite ingenious.

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

“Look, 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 were occupied by Rome and inundated by Greek culture, the Pharisees were, in many ways, a commendable group trying their hardest to keep and grow a distinctly Jewish identity among the people of Israel, so they would remember who they are, and who they are called to be, in the face of massive cultural challenges.

By washing, they mark themselves off as people faithful to God; people therefore entitled to receive God’s blessing.

We aren’t so far removed from that kind of thinking.

While 2000 years separates us from the Pharisees, we too have our own ideas about purity; except rather than “purity,” we call it “doing what’s right,” or “what Jesus intended,” or “a place for everything, and everything in its place.”

And so we Episcopalians are often seen as the model of establishment Christianity.

We are often morally upright and we are good citizens; but we are also, as a group, traditionally very slow to respond to issues of social injustice or the need to make structural changes to our society for the benefit of those without.

We don’t mind helping the needy, as long as they are the “deserving needy!”

And then there are our Roman Catholic friends who refuse to recognize non-Roman churches.

We and all the other non-Romans are called "ecclesial communities".

And then there are some of our brother and sister Christians who deny the whole idea of evolution while others try to collapse Christianity into a Leave it to Beaver family friendly cult that looks down its nose at anything that isn't a blond haired blue eyed Jesus.

And 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.

So, just saying, modern Christianity is in no position to sneer at those Pharisees!

Make no mistake, we need to have boundaries and traditions and rules and doctrines.

Without these things, the wine has no skin to be poured into; without such things, we can't know who "we" are.

The problem is not necessarily boundaries or traditions or rules or doctrines as much as when we, like the Pharisees, substitute boundaries, traditions, rules and doctrines for the wild, unpredictable, challenging, demanding, cajoling, longing, insistent, and pregnant, yes, very pregnant, Spirit of the Living God!

We forget, to our peril, that God isn't about turning us into adorable couch potatoes, but God is always calling us beyond and out of who we think we are.

"God isn't in love with the boundaries we create and carefully protect.

Drawing lines separates good guys from bad guys, wheat from chaff, good fish from bad, but ours is a God who loves the bad as well as the good, because, when we see good and bad through the eyes of God, we come to see that they are hopelessly intertwined, intermingled, inseparable, which is why, thanks be to God, untamed grace keeps pouring out into alien territory." (Don McCullough, paraphrase).

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 or beliefs sum up the substance of the Living God, then your god is too small!"

And then there is this.

Once we come to glimpse the unending yearning God has for all of creation, for all human beings, then we slowly come to realize that whether the issue is terrorism or Trump or homosexuality or women priests or humanists or liberals or war or peace or economic injustice, whatever human reality you name; this much is true:

if you follow Jesus, don't expect to stay clean!

You're gonna get dirty!

Roy Pearson puts it this way:

"the church is like a chimney sweep, it can't do its job in comfortable surroundings or with clean hands.

And so cleanliness is not next to godliness, dirt is.

Dirt, pain, sorrow, prejudice, injustice, treachery."

These, and more, await the follower of Jesus.

We are constantly called by Jesus out of our easy chairs and onto the hard wooden stools 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 we find him in the sweet scented quiet solitude of the church pew.

Jesus comes to us where we are.

I learned this week that the literal translation for the word "unclean" that we hear in today's gospel doesn't mean "dirty" as much as it means "ordinary" or "common."

The distinction the Pharisees are drawing isn't about hygiene; it's about separating what is holy from what is ordinary; separating the holy from the common.

Religious people of every era tend to believe that the holy is found somewhere other than in and amongst the ordinary, the common.

Religious people often believe that somehow, if the common, the ordinary, touches the holy, the holy will be contaminated.

It's an "outside - in" kind of thinking, which leads to a way of looking at the world, and each other, as dangerous, suspect, as something to fear.

Jesus comes to show us that God is most immediately, most tangibly, most substantially, dancing about in the common, in the ordinary.

For Jesus, the holy cannot be contaminated by the ordinary - indeed, the holy - like yeast mixed with dough - like seeds planted in good ground - like the Word becoming flesh, the holy contaminates the ordinary, making ordinary things, like you and me, holy.

This is "inside - out" kind of living, where the power of God uses each of us as a channel, a mirror, a fountain, to scatter undeserved, even undesired, grace, everywhere we can.

So what are the boundaries that mark us off from others?

It's a question each of us can ask, because we each of us have different boundaries, creating different circles of insiders and outsiders.

But what is the distinctive Christian line in the sand, the line we must always strive to be within?

What is it?

Jesus tells us:

"This I command you, that you love one another. Jn 15:17.

That's our boundary.

That we love everyone, as God, in Jesus, loves us.

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