

Let us pray:

Lord, we know that you hear our every word, whether spoken, or in silent prayer. You know our hearts, in the sharing of music, liturgy, and in the teachings we receive through the Scriptures. Grant us grace, so our hearts might be open to your Word, and that we may be eager to abide in your kingdom, as your adopted children. Amen

Please be seated. (pause)

Last week, we were in John's gospel, as we have been for the three weeks before that.

Today, in Year B of our three-year lectionary cycle, we return to Mark.

In Mark, chapter seven, beginning at the first verse, Jesus and his disciples continue to travel throughout the countryside.

They have stopped somewhere along the way to eat something. A crowd has begun to gather around them. Within this crowd are several pharisees and scribes who have traveled up from Jerusalem to hear what this teacher, Jesus, is saying.

I don't know about you, but I know from my own experience, when I am moving from one place to another, there may not always be a place available to cleanse my hands before handling food items. In this 21st century, we have the advantage of hand sanitizers, something the disciples and Jesus would not have had in 1st century Palestine. So we have

an advantage in ways to cleanse our hands. In today's gospel, we find the disciples and Jesus in a situation where needing to eat forces them to make choices.

There appears to be nowhere available to wash their hands before they eat. At least, the scripture does not expand on this aspect of their journey. And, of course, the pharisees and scribes, the keepers of the ritualistic laws for the people of Israel, are watching Jesus and his followers for every tiny miscue they might make. Simply stated, they are looking to trap Jesus.

For the pharisees, being an observant "Jew" meant abiding by the 'rules', the 'laws' laid down in the Torah and the Jewish traditions. And that means abiding by the law, every day, and in every way.

In Mark, chapter seven, the pharisees confront Jesus about the failure of his followers to complete the ritual washing of their hands before they eat. For us today, washing our hands before we eat has taken on a much broader importance.

Washing your hands frequently, like every time you come in from being in a public space, on a transit vehicle, in a gathering place, a dwelling, or many other situations, helps to stop the spread of viruses, as has masking, and vaccines. All this makes sense in light of our recent experience with the Covid virus, right?

The pharisees had two reasons for their criticism of Jesus and his disciples for their apparent lack of hygiene practices before they ate.

- 1) The disciples' hands would not be cleansed of anything that might be a health risk to themselves, very similar to what we have faced today with COVID.**
- 2) And secondly, the pharisees saw it as their responsibility to make sure that everyone followed the rules laid down by the elders some many years before. Why? Because that was the 'Jewish' Law and as the pharisees saw to it, everyone, no matter where they were, or who they were, must follow the rules.**

The criticism, leveled by the pharisees and scribes toward Jesus and his followers, did not sit well with Jesus. Jesus knew the value of keeping oneself healthy through abiding by the standards of good personal hygiene, and the "laws" laid down in the scriptures and the Torah. Laws which reflected those standards and were meant to keep everyone well.

For us today, we all try to keep ourselves healthy by abiding by good standards of hygiene, when it comes to hand washing, keeping our dishes and utensils clean, foodstuffs safe for consumption; and to our society safe, good hygiene is a given. But let's be honest here, who out there has not consumed a berry, a piece of fruit, or a sample from a vendor's market stand or in a grocery store without first washing our hands.? (pause) Most of us would have to say,

yes, I have done that, done that at least before COVID time. We are slowly beginning to return to this familiar pattern, but it will take a long time before we all return to what we remember as our customary ways of doing things. And we may never all get there! (pause)

Jesus knew what the pharisees and the scribes were doing. Jesus knew the evil that was in their hearts. He begins by directing his comments toward the pharisees. He outright calls them “hypocrites”.

Now, ‘hypocrites’ is pretty strong language. Herb O’Driscoll, who, even in death, remains one of my favourite modern-day theologians, writes this, and here I am paraphrasing. Jesus ‘was not condemning the “law”, the “law” was developed out of years of life experience lived out by the people of Israel. The “law” helped keep the people safe and healthy. (pause)

The “law” helped keep the people safe and healthy.

Hey, wait a minute, isn’t that the same way we have learned to live. The restrictions, COVID has dictated for our society, come out of the abundance of care we need to exercise to keep everyone safe. That’s good, isn’t it? I think so!

When Jesus responds to the criticism leveled at the disciples and himself as their leader, he directs most of his comments to the crowd gathered around him. “It is not what one puts into the human body that causes one to become evil, defiled, or unclean.” The rules for safe food consumption are there to keep us all safe, no question.

But Jesus goes on to say this – the things that defile the person come not from outside the body, but from within the inner most sanctum of one’s being, that place we call the heart. It is from our heart, not the physical pumping organ that pushes blood around our bodies, but from the metaphorical centre we use to determine what we believe is right or wrong, good, or evil. From here, (pause) from here, come the things that separate us from the love of our Creator.

Today, we are witnessing the further decent of our society away from living as God’s children. While we are still on this earth, we Christians, and all believers in the Creator for that matter, have opportunity to live our lives as caring, sharing, faithful people. Living our lives in the pattern Jesus modelled for us when he lived among us, as a human being.

Eating things that have not been washed, or not washing our hands before we eat something will probably not result in most of us dying. Although, according to my mother, rest her soul, if we didn’t wash everything before we ate it, we were destined to become ill at the least, or at worst, to die. So far, I have survived my own shortcomings when it comes to washing everything I eat. My mother may have been over-protective, but I still love you Mom for trying to keep us safe.

But let’s get back to the things that defile from within. You heard the list of evils outlined in Mark’s gospel. Many of our generation have turned away from, or forgotten, about God. Yet God has promised never to turn away from us. God is

always ready to receive any who turn back to Him. He is our Creator.

It seems clear to me what Jesus is saying here. If we turn to God and in turn, turn away from the things that separate us from God's loving care, we will be blessed with God's gift of grace in this life and the promise of life ever living, in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is God's wonderful gift to all who believe in Him, and for this, we are thankful. Amen