

**The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 17
Holy Comforter Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
August 30, 2009**

“...and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands...”

Clearly one of the best good health practices a person can adopt is that of washing the hands often. It is a proven disease prevention technique. Of course these days, we are constantly reminded that we should wash our hands. In fact, almost all health care facilities will have a bottle of antibacterial hand rinse at the desk where you check in or out.

In all restaurants, signs are posted in the restrooms regarding state health regulations for all employees and hand washing. Someone in my last parish wanted to start a movement of “passing the Purell” at the passing of the Peace. (It didn’t fly – those clergy!)

In today’s gospel it sounds as if Jesus is discounting the importance of washing hands. Is it possible that Jesus did not believe in good hygiene?

Actually this gospel passage has nothing to do with hygiene. It has to do with rules and regulations for religious practice.

It is clear that Jesus is irritated with the religious leaders. The leaders have passed negative judgment on Jesus’ followers because they did not use the ritualistic form of cleansing before eating. It had nothing to do with being clean – it had to do with how you went about it.

Imagine this for a moment. You are supposed to wash your hands a certain way – you are to put the soap on first – a particular kind of soap – then run water and lather up your hands – rinse and repeat the action – then use a linen towel to dry. What? No linen towel? Unclean – unworthy – blasphemous – you can't be a member of my church.

Now I think that this is dangerous territory for Episcopalians. We do love our ways of doing things. We love a good parade –all in good taste of course. We do like for things to be 'just so.'

In fact we are the only denomination that has Eleven Commandments – you didn't know that?

Of course, we have the usual Ten Commandments and then we have an additional one:

THOU SHALL NOT BE TACKY!

In an effort to avoid the tacky and make worship a beautiful and dignified experience, we have adopted various practices and traditions to support our goal of what we think of as good and correct practice.

Let me quickly add that I like it that way. I want worship to be a meaningful and lovely experience. And I believe that many of our traditions lend themselves to that end. However, we must acknowledge that much of what we revere as good liturgical practice is based on tradition and custom and certainly is not of absolute necessity.

In some respects we need to not take ourselves too seriously – acknowledge that many of our practices came from situations that at one time served very practical functions but today have a very different function. Candles may be the clearest example I

can think of. They used to serve a very important function – they provided light. Today we have plenty of light provided by electricity. Candles serve an aesthetic - not a practical function. Anthony de Mello has a little story that gives some insight to this dilemma.

“When the (bishop came into the cathedral to conduct worship, his cat would follow him in and distract the worshipers.) So he ordered that the cat be tied during the service.

After the (bishop) died the cat continued to be tied during the worship service. And when the cat died, another cat was brought in to the (cathedral) so that it could be duly tied during the worship service.

Centuries later, learned treatises were written by scholarly disciples on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed.” (my edits)

In the same book (The Song of the Bird, Anthony de Mello, Doubleday, 1985) de Mello offers this little jewel:

“October 1917: The Russian Revolution is born. Human history takes a new direction.

The story goes that that very month, the Russian Church was assembled in council. A passionate debate was in progress about the color of the surplice to be used in liturgical functions. Some insisted vehemently that it had to be white. Others, with equal vehemence, argued that it had to be purple.

de Mello then says, “Coming to grips with a revolution is more of a bother than organizing a liturgy. I’d rather say my prayers than get involved in neighborhood disputes.”

Our challenge is to insure that we do not confuse form with substance. Do not confuse the wrapper from the candy.

It is no accident that the lesson from James occurs in conjunction with this gospel.

“...be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves...if any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

It is of no value that we claim to hear God’s word but do not act on it. It is of no value that we get all of the outward actions of worship and liturgy done with perfection and do not live loving and compassionate lives.

What we do in here on Sundays is to reconnect with our story as God’s people. What we do in here on Sundays is to be fed by our relationship with each other and by our participation in the Holy Eucharist.

But our practice as Christians is out there.

Oh sure it might take place in the church – like the ESL class – but the direction and focus is service out there. Of course it might be having a Hispanic pre-school class here in this building, but the focus is out there.

What we must look out for – the substance of our risk is: Is it easier to ‘do church’ than it is to do justice?

If Christians are supposed to be concerned for the poor and needy, then do we not have to be concerned about the causes of their poverty as well?

Of course we are called to alleviate pain and suffering, hunger and ill health as people come to us, but are we not also called to address the circumstances and causes of these social ills?

James reminds us that we are to be ‘doers’ of God’s word - not just hearers who deceive themselves.

One writer puts our problem this way, “Radio and television are filled with people who speak religious words. Pulpits are filled with ministers who seek to convey religious messages to congregations. Denominations and churches debate matters of faith and practice. Religious leaders appear on talk-shows and argue opposing views with angry voices. At the same time this religious talk is taking place, there are many in society who are suffering and crying out for justice. As the gap between rich and poor in the world continues to grow, many Christians choose to remain silent. As the cost of healthcare rises and access to adequate care decreases for millions around the world, many Christians remain silent. Thousands of people die each day from starvation. Most Christians, however, have chosen to not to speak a word or to get involved with the issue of world hunger ...” (Toby Ziglar, quoted in Synthesis , August 30, 2009)

“...and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands...”

Let us not get so concerned with the method of hand washing that we end up washing our hands of any responsibility and commitment to love and serve our neighbors as Christ loves us.