

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
30th August, 2009
Pentecost XIV
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Doctor:

What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.

Gentlewoman:

It is an accustom'd action with her, to seem thus washing her hands. I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.

Lady Macbeth:

Yet here's a spot.

Doctor:

Hark, she speaks. I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.

Lady Macbeth:

Out, damn'd spot! out, I say!—One; two: why, then 'tis time to do't.—Hell is murky.—Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our pow'r to accompt?—Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?

Macbeth Act 5, Scene 1, 26-40

Lady Macbeth sleepwalks through the royal castle. As her waiting-woman and her doctor listen in, she mutters fragments of an imaginary conversation that recalls the night she and her husband conspired to murder King Duncan. The hour is two o'clock; she upbraids her husband for his bad conscience; she insists that there will be nothing to fear once they've grabbed the crown; she marvels at how much blood Duncan had to shed. As Lady Macbeth replays

this scene for the eavesdroppers, she not only incriminates herself, but also reveals the pangs of conscience she had ridiculed in her husband.

"Out, damn'd spot" is a prime example of "Instant Bard," tailor-made for ironic jokes and marketing schemes. But the "spot" isn't a coffee stain, it's blood. One theme of Macbeth is how tough it is to wash, scrub, or soak out nasty bloodstains. Macbeth said that even the ocean couldn't wash his hands clean of Duncan's blood; Lady Macbeth, who scorned him then, now finds the blood dyed into her conscience. The king and queen persist in imagining that physical actions can root out psychological or spiritual demons, but the play is an exposition of how wrong they are.

Jesus saw a preoccupation with the external when he looked at the scribes -- the expert Bible teachers, the religion professors with their Ph.D.s in theology and hermeneutics -- and the Pharisees -- the devout guardians of the faith, the religion experts, the senior pastors and serious churchgoers. These people knew the holiness code cover to cover and could quote you chapter and verse.

They'd become "purity professionals," ritual specialists. (Heidi Husted)

But Biblical commands never take precedence over what is compassionate and just and caring. We have learned this slowly - from slavery to the position of women. We are learning it slowly in areas such as gender, sexual orientation and power. Jesus speaks about the kind of tradition that fails the test. He points out that there is a kind of tradition that is wrong, that gets in the way of spiritual realities rather than pointing to them.

And Jesus reminds us that washing our hands – taking care of the externals – is not the answer to moral questions. It didn't work for Lady Macbeth and it doesn't work for us.

The tendency that Jesus criticizes can appear in any religious group. People hold on to merely human traditions as if they were divinely revealed – while at the same time, the basic virtues of love, reconciliation, and the good news that God has come among us as savior get lost. We can too easily sacrifice faith to save tradition, even when we all know that traditions were established by human beings, not by God.

It's easier to follow traditional rituals than to allow our hearts to be transformed. It is so easy to get wrapped up in traditions that we can forget who we are and why we are here.

My mother taught me early on that the dinner fork goes on the left, the knife on the right, and the teaspoon to the right of the knife. Napkin on the left. I still do this. Emily Post would be proud. But I know that the essence of a successful dinner party isn't the placement of the knife and fork – it is the care that goes into the cooking, the warmth of the conversation, the friendship of those around the table.

And I know that the essence of faith isn't whether I've washed my hands before worship, or where the chalice is placed on the altar, or which translation of the Lord's Prayer I use – it is the care I extend to another human being, the depth of my commitment to God's justice, and the welcome we extend to those who gather at our table.

Just four years ago I led a worship service on a slab of concrete in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi. We had found a crystal goblet, remarkably un-chipped, unbroken by Hurricane Katrina. We found a loaf of bread somewhere, and someone located an unopened bottle of wine. We had a few prayer books, and while the words of our Eucharist may have been somewhat unusual, given that we only had three prayer books for the twenty gathered faithful, our communion, our worship, our thanksgiving was nonetheless one of the most powerful experiences of Christian faith I have ever experienced.

"That old normal of being the Episcopal Church with our doors locked, being a church that existed for we who were in it will be no more. That washed away with your refrigerator," Bishop Charles Jenkins of Louisiana said during a homily just weeks after Katrina decimated New Orleans and the Gulf coast. "Our new normal is a church engaged, a church that is a servant church and a church that lives not for itself alone but for all for whom Christ died."

The old normal of following traditions to the letter washed away with refrigerators, air conditioners, walls, cars, trees, restaurants, shops, streets, houses, banks, and people.

Somehow, the terrifying event that was Hurricane Katrina reminded hundreds, thousands of people that we could no longer count on business as usual – or church as usual.

Far too often the church carries on as if there were no concerns outside our walls, maintaining some sort of status quo. For far too long the church ignored the inhumanity of slavery and then the injustice of discrimination. The church nervously spoke out against war, the church timidly expressed her doubt that women should stay in their place. We didn't want to upset our apple cart.

Jesus tells us that some apple carts need to be upset.

He tells us that the status quo is the place of fear instead of the place of love, the place of hesitation instead of the place to forge ahead, the place of cowardice instead of the place of courage.

Jesus tells us to love the enemy. To welcome the stranger. To wage reconciliation instead of war. To bravely proclaim that God forgives.

It doesn't have anything to do with how many times we wash our hands.

It has to do with how he washes our hearts.

And it has to do with moving ahead – respecting the past, not wishing to shut the door on it, but worshiping the God of love instead of the traditions of humankind.

This is the way of Jesus.

Life is short ... and we do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So let us be swift to love and make haste to be kind, and the blessing of God will be with us.

Amen.