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THE HEART'S INTENTIONS

Music and hand motions are a good way to teach. I can still remember the following ditty from kindergarten, "This is the way we brush our teeth, brush our teeth, brush our teeth, this is the way we brush our teeth so early in the morning." And then the song continued with another personal hygiene habit, "This is the way we wash our hands, wash our hands," If my teacher had given us a lecture on the relationship between germ theory and dental hygiene I probably would have lost all of my teeth by now. But this way of learning was fun and effective.

The Jews in Jesus' time did not know about germ theory but their hygienic practices were very sensible: the washing of hands before meals, the thorough cleaning of pots and pans, washing produce from the market... all excellent public health measures that minimized the spread of illness.

We enjoy the blessings of water; a cold drink, a hot bath or shower, a swim, a splash on the face in the morning, a tip of a finger in holy water. There is a profound connection between water and spirit. Jesus, who was baptized by John in the River Jordan, would have agreed. So why, in today's gospel from Mark, does he give the Pharisees and scribes such a hard time? They have come all the way from Jerusalem to assess Jesus. They are shocked when they see some of his disciples eating with what they call "defiled hands".

They are appalled *not* because they fear the disciples will catch a cold, but because they believe there is a direct connection between physical cleanliness and spiritual purity. Any 7-year-old child who has just returned playing outdoors will tell you that is not true. The holiness code they observe, and think all Jews should likewise observe, demands many ritual practices in order to be spiritually clean.

It was widely believed that touching anyone or anything considered “unclean” would lead to defilement. Lepers could not be touched; menstruating women could neither touch nor *be* touched. This is why we should marvel at the courage of the woman with the flow who defied the holiness code and touched Jesus’ robe in order to be healed. And she was.

In Jerusalem, there was a series of ritual baths (mikvahs) located at progressive heights on the vast steps of the Temple. The more ritual baths that the pilgrim took the greater was their access to God. Not incidentally, this practice generated revenue for the religious establishment, perhaps similar to the indulgences of the Middle Ages. Following a rigid purity code was believed to determine access to God. Jesus, however, was clearly about something very different. Access did not depend on adherence to doctrine. No one had the right or spiritual power to determine who kept company with God and who did not.

What really galls Jesus’ interrogators is not the fact that the disciples eat with defiled hands so much as their apparent lack of respect for the traditions of the elders. Perhaps the disciples were early practitioners of “Doing Church Differently”.

Jesus lays into the Pharisees and scribes for their mindless obedience to petty rules while ignoring God’s higher purposes. He calls them “hypocrites” saying, “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human

tradition.” Raising the discussion to a new level, Jesus calls the crowd because he wants *everyone* to hear what he has to say.

“Listen to me all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come...”

In other words, the sticks and stones thrown at someone may break bones (literally or metaphorically) but they cannot defile. Rather, those who hurl them are the ones who are defiled. When our children were in grade school there was a clever retort used to respond to antagonists, “What you say, you are.” There is something inside each of us, including the greatest and the least, which cannot be violated. We might call it the image of God or the soul. This precious soul can be covered over by wounds and obscured by sins. The pain of life can result in spiritual amnesia. We forget who we are and that we have this soul. Yet, it is still there.

Jesus teaches that the intention to hurt or avenge comes from within. There are times when because of pride or hurt feelings we have said things we quickly regretted. If we get angry with someone and say things intended to “get back”, our words stick to us. We are the “defiled” in that case. The author of today’s epistle counsels his readers,

“My beloved, let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness ... If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues, but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.”

The teaching of Jesus must have infuriated the visiting authorities from Jerusalem. In a few words he debunked the practices and doctrine of

the elders so important to them. The implication of what he says is that all their hand washing, ritual bathing and many other devotional practices intended to make them pure and holy are useless by themselves. What really counts is inside, in the human heart. Jesus shook the foundations of their identity and their institutional power over others. It is always a good question for the faithful of any religion to ask; “To what extent are we following certain religious practices and traditions merely because they were handed down to us from our elders?” Question everything.

How might *the crowd* have felt upon hearing Jesus’ teaching about defilement?

Relief, I should think. To a people economically oppressed by an occupying power and spiritually disenfranchised by an overbearing religious establishment, here was some really good news. Jesus’ words deliver them from the margins of society and place them on equal footing with everyone else. No matter what they say about you, no matter how much they hurt, they cannot defile you. The crowd does not have to overcome a series of ritual hurdles to be acceptable to God.

If the person who deliberately hurts another or seeks to destroy them, defiles themselves and not the victim, then we may also conclude that no matter how badly our feelings have been hurt, no matter how victimized or abused we have been, there remains a precious part of ourselves that cannot be violated, that is still holy.

So, does it really work, what Jesus says?

Sometimes... When someone shames or attacks us it is hard not to take it personally, hard not to feel defiled. But it is possible. When a hostile driver cuts you off and makes an obscene gesture in your direction it is hard

to exercise the detachment the James counsels. But it is possible. It is extremely challenging to overcome the destructive rivalries that often perpetuate cycles of defilement and violence. But it is possible. Some psychic wounds are really hard to heal. But that too is possible. Jesus is our model, hope and teacher. In today's gospel, he comforts the crowd by telling them no matter how much someone tries, they cannot defile them.. Perhaps he is speaking from his own experience as well as reflecting on what lies ahead for him. Those who crucify him will do everything they can to defile Jesus; including beating him, spitting on him, mocking and scorning him, torturing him, stripping him and then nailing him to the cross. But his tormentors are defiled by their heinous actions. He remains undefiled.

Robert Coles documented the experiences of Ruby Bridges, a six-year old African-American girl, who alone by herself integrated a public school in New Orleans in 1960 following a court order. Ruby came to school every morning and was harassed and insulted by a mob of whites outside of the school. She was from a family of deep Christian faith. Amazingly, she was not intimidated and could not be defiled no matter how ugly the taunts and jeers.

One morning, accompanied by federal marshals as usual, Ruby stopped to pray on her way through the angry mob. She prayed for God to forgive the people in the crowd. Ruby trusted that even those who sought to defile her had souls worthy of forgiveness.

She is now a successful businesswoman, mother and founder of an organization to encourage parental involvement in public schools.

“Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things:
Graft in our hearts the love of your name; increase in us true religion;
nourish us with all goodness, and bring forth in us the fruit of good
works, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Collect for the Day)