

**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**The Rev. Christy Dorn**

**9-3-06**

Clean Hands  
Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15

We live in a time that is preoccupied with external form. Manners, for instance. We're impressed, aren't we, when people show good manners? And we're turned off by those who are rude or inconsiderate. But good manners are not the same as good religion. Jesus' disciples were criticized for their lack of good manners. Specifically, they failed to wash their hands before eating. Now, today, this would be considered poor hygiene. In Jesus' time, it was considered poor religion. The Jews of that day had a ritual of ceremonial cleansing which they performed before eating their meals. Evidently the disciples were not well versed in religious tradition. They were, after all, from the backwater region of Galilee. They were rather crude men even by the standards of their own day. But Jesus saw possibilities in them that those who criticized them did not see.

The Pharisees' concern for ritual was not a bad thing. To be sure, there's a proper concern for exterior form. We observe rituals and hopefully they touch our spiritual center. But the Pharisees—ecclesiastical gnats that they were—and their concern for outward form was a concern gone amok. Their rituals were not for teaching the heart beauty, but for masking the heart's ugliness. They attacked in the name of prestige and power. They confused tradition for truth, ritual for righteousness, the word of the lips for the word of the heart.

But I don't want to be too quick to dismiss the Pharisees. There's another side to their actions. Psalm 24: 3-4a reads, "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" The answer: "Those who have clean hands and pure hearts..." Being acceptable before God is important.

When Isaiah first heard God's call to become a prophet to Israel, he cried out, "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the king, the Lord Almighty." (Is. 6:5).

God's chosen people, the Jews, had been in God's presence. They were acutely aware of God's holiness. God is over here, and imperfect humanity is way over there, and between us stands a Grand Canyon of sin. Who is worthy to come before the Lord? We must respect the Pharisees' position. They wanted to honor washing of hands and feet, to remind them of the holiness of God. But somehow, over the centuries, their reminder became a rule, and the rule became a religion.

For Jesus, this kind of religion misses the point. As always Jesus walks through the superficial and stands at the forgotten center of things, and knocks sharply upon the doors of the heart. Jesus calls us to an inward journey—to the inner life of our souls.

True religion is about the heart and about relationships, not about manners or external rituals and observances. True religion is concerned about what comes from within. There've been times in the church's history when ceremonial niceties led to major disputes. I think we're occupied now with weightier concerns.

I heard an interview recently between NPR and Karen Armstrong. Karen Armstrong, you will recall, is the world renowned religious thinker and author. She has spent most of her life studying and understanding different religious traditions. It's her belief that religion isn't about believing things. Rather, it's about behaving in a way that changes you, that gives you intimations of holiness. It doesn't really matter what you believe, she says, as long as it leads you to practical compassion. Compassion is the king; not doctrinal formulations. We need compassion more than we need religious certainty, more than doctrinal statements or more rules about what people can do in the privacy of their own homes and who can get married and who can be bishops or priests.

From today's gospel, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come...." In the hurts, indignities, and injustices perpetrated against us, what is often worse than the act itself is the evil that act evokes from us: we respond with suspicion, cynicism, selfishness, anger, vengeance. I remember a friend who was recently divorced telling me that the worst thing about divorce is not what the other person does to you, but what it makes you do to yourself.

One of the most difficult challenges of being a disciple of Jesus is not to let those things "outside" of us diminish what we are "inside" ourselves, not to let such anger or vengeance displace the things of God in the center of our hearts.

Why do we let ourselves be diminished that way? Because we're terrified of living from the center. In the center, God waits. In the center we are utterly known and utterly loved—who can endure this? In the center are also our shadows. When we're scared of the deep center, we build up the necessary barricade to keep present shadows *in* and even more threatening shadows *out*.

Jesus comes mercifully to shatter the barricades and return us to the center. He addresses fear directly: "There is nothing outside of you which, by going into you, can defile you." Nothing, you ask? Not if the center refuses it lodging.

Who we are, what we do, the kind of people we are begin within our hearts—the place where god dwells; the center. May our spirits be opened to hear God's voice speaking to us in our hearts, calling us to compassion, forgiveness, joy, and reconciliation