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July 19, 2015  

Dirty Hands, Clean Heart  
Proverbs 8:32-9:6  
Luke 11:37-42

Reading this passage transports me back to elementary school. Seared in my memory is the handwashing station outside of the cafeteria: a row of soap dispensers, plastic globes filled with industrial yellow soap, inverted on top of their pumps, screwed into the wall next to a long, low metal trough. There was a pipe that ran the length of the trough that would spit trickles of water, for students to wash their hands. We would line up, get a pump of soap, and hold our hands under the weak streams of water as we walked along, grabbing rough brown paper towels at the end before running into the cafeteria for lunch. All of the ingredients were there for us to be eating with clean hands: soap, water, space, time. In reality, though, it seemed like we ended up with the suggestion of clean hands, the semblance of handwashing, a half-hearted effort focused more on getting the smelly soap off our hands than scrubbing grit and grime. I wonder if the Pharisees would have approved!

I think all of us would rather have been eating with Jesus, where washing up was optional.

As I considered this passage, my memory of mediocre handwashing contrasted with what is to me the quintessential image of clean hands – surgeons scrubbing in before surgery: lathering hands and forearms, vigorously scrubbing nails, cleaning around cuticles and between fingers before putting on latex gloves. They do this to ensure that no germs are brought into the operating room, to keep the sterile field of the surgery clean.

The Pharisees spent a lot of time thinking about cleanliness. Their lives were governed by rules of ritual purity that helped people live as they believed God intended them to live. The rules grew out of time spent in the
wilderness, rules that initially kept the tribes healthy and gave them a separate identity as children of God. The rules governed life as Israel became a great nation, and hardened into laws after the fall of Jerusalem, when their community was scattered to the corners of the earth, and their identity relied upon protecting themselves from contamination from the other cultures and pagan practices that surrounded those living in exile. The Pharisees were in the business of sanctifying the people of God: the law was there to make them holy.

But then along came Jesus. Jesus challenged their ideas about what was holy and pleasing to God. The religious leaders clearly respected him, because they invited him over for dinner. But Jesus ate with anybody! With Pharisees and other faithful people, but also with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners like you and me. He ignored rules about who you could associate with. He disregarded laws that said what you could and couldn’t do on the Sabbath. This meant he healed people, gathered food, forgave sins on the day set aside for resting in God. Jesus crossed all sorts of boundaries that the religious folks had put up to keep themselves separate from the world – touching those who were considered unclean, eating without washing his hands. He didn’t pay much attention to the rules of ritual purity, and he did so intentionally.

He ignored the rules to show the Pharisees that they’re missing the point. They’re focused on the wrong things! They care too much about outward appearances, and not enough about their true selves. Jesus indicts them as being full of greed and wickedness, washing the outside of the glass while ignoring the inside. They’re so focused on power and purity, they’ve neglected their inward faith. And what’s in our hearts – our motivations, our faith – matters to God. Jesus cared about more than appearances. He cared for the whole person; he demanded authenticity!

For us, carefully curated facebook accounts can show exactly what we want them to – a perfect person, a happy family -- while glossing over self-doubt and depression, or other problems that might plague us. If you want to, you can put an Instagram filter on just about everything you present to the world,
making everything dreamy, and beautiful, and perfect. But the truth is, everything is not dreamy, and beautiful, and perfect, is it? We all have imperfections, we all have doubt, we all have problems we wrestle with. Jesus calls us to be authentic – to be honest about who we are, sharing those things that we might otherwise try to hide. To be our whole selves, not just part. To give our whole lives, not just Sunday morning. To care for whole people, not just keep up appearances.

But focusing on appearances isn’t Jesus’ only critique for the Pharisees. He said they focused on the minutiae instead of looking for the bigger picture. They tithed – donate a tenth – of the herbs they used. This went above and beyond what the law required. But to do that while ignoring injustice and failing to show love – well, that’s missing the point entirely about what is pleasing to God.

You may know that I spent three years after seminary as a community organizer for an affordable housing nonprofit outside of Boston. Part of that job was visiting people in their homes to get to know them, find out what they cared about, and connect them to opportunities to make change on their streets.

One couple I visited often was Hector and Hortencia Sanchez – retired Puerto Rican immigrants who doted on their 9 year-old grandson and kept close tabs on their noisy neighbors. They weren’t my most reliable community leaders, but we had a good relationship, so I stopped by their apartment with some regularity. It was always dark and tidy, covered in Puerto Rican tchotchkes, with a big Puerto Rican flag on one wall. And there was one notable quirk: all of their furniture, including lampshades and their kitchen table, were covered in clear plastic slipcovers. It meant that I would try to keep visits short and remain standing for the duration, especially in the summer months. If I sat down on their plush black sofa, I would end up having to peel my legs off the plastic, where they’d inevitably stick like glue.
The Sanchezes had made it. They’d flourished in the US, while holding on to their Puerto Rican heritage. But somehow, it seemed like they weren’t quite comfortable in their new life. They wanted to keep their belongings safe, putting slipcovers up as protection… but missing the point of a comfortable living room in the process.

In the same way, the Pharisees are seeking to protect their community and preserve their way of life. But God’s intention for us isn’t purity and perfection – not if we ignore those who are in need or shut out those who are different in order to achieve it. God’s intention for us isn’t separation. God calls us – all of us— into community together. To focus on rules and outward appearances of piety without attending to the needs of the community is missing the point. I can think of a lot of examples of times when we focus on the details and miss the big picture. I’ll bet you can, too.

Paying attention to the small things is important. But not when details become all we can see. It’s like getting upset about wrinkled napkins or unwashed hands at Thanksgiving dinner, and forgetting to celebrate that the whole family is together for the first time in months. The law had become so important to the Pharisees that it was all they could see!

After all, they couldn’t recognize the new thing God was doing right in front of them in the person of Jesus. Or, maybe they could see it, but they were afraid of it.

Maybe they were afraid of the attention Jesus might attract from the Roman authorities – after all, John had been beheaded for his moral stance against the governor, and Jesus was drawing an even bigger following than John.

Maybe they were afraid of what his boundary-breaking table fellowship might do to their community. They had done everything they could to protect themselves from outside corruption and contamination. As an oppressed minority in an occupied land, they had to work hard to preserve their identity and protect their rituals.
Maybe they were afraid of what Jesus would mean for the established order of things. By establishing firm boundaries around what was permissible and what was not, the religious leaders ensured their place in the hierarchy of their community. But Jesus turned life upside down, throwing their rules and hierarchy out the window. The Pharisees scrubbed their hands and focused on keeping the corruption of sin and sickness away from their table and out of the temple… keeping the germs out of their operating room, because germs meant infection …infection from dangerous ideas, the weakening of common identity, possibly even death to the religious practices they wanted to protect.

But Jesus wasn’t sent to serve in the sterile field of an operating room. He didn’t come proclaiming the good news just for some, he didn’t eat only with those who were faithful, he didn’t reserve his touch only for those who were whole and healthy, he didn’t stay inside the temple and preach. God sent Jesus to preach the good news near and far, to tear down the walls that were dividing people from each other, to say that God’s love is for all people, to extend God’s grace to everyone, to take off the gloves and get his hands dirty, to really dig into the mess and the muck of everyday life, because NO mess is too much for God, and NO person is beyond redemption – no matter their illness, no matter their sin, no matter how broken they are.

How would this community change if we committed to be our full selves here? To care for whole people? To embrace authenticity? To focus less on rules, and more on loving one another, and seeking justice for all? It would probably be a little messier. We would definitely get our hands dirty. But wouldn’t it be a place you wanted to be, because you could finally, completely be yourself? Wouldn’t that be wonderful? Wouldn’t that be holy and wholly pleasing to God? May it be so!