Fried chicken.
Fried shrimp.
Hamburgers.
Hot dogs.
Grilled cheese sandwiches.
Pizza.
Barbeque.
A whole boiled lobster.
Any one get the connection with this list of foods and today’s gospel story?
That’s right!
These are only a few of the foods that are “traditionally” eaten . . . with our hands.
And, especially after eating the last two—barbeque and lobster—most of us need more than a few of those moist towelettes thoughtful restaurants provide.

The Pharisees in today’s story probably wouldn’t think too kindly of these meals—especially the barbeque and lobster—not only because they are unclean food, but also because of the “unclean” way these foods are eaten.
On the surface, that seems to be what this argument is about.
The Pharisees are criticizing Jesus and his followers for eating with unclean hands, and Jesus is criticizing the Pharisees for living with unclean hearts.
Pretty easy to tell the good guys from the bad guys in this story, isn’t it?

Could you imagine being so focused on following the letter of the law that you completely miss out on what the son of God is saying to you?
Or so focused on the law that you didn’t notice that your friends were hungry and needed something to eat?
Oh, yes, and they also needed something to wash their hands with?
How could the Pharisees be so hard-hearted?

As is often the case, there’s more going on here than a casual reading can tell us. The Pharisees are often portrayed as the villains in the gospels, the wily scoundrels constantly trying to trap Jesus so they could get him out of the way.
But if we paint them in such one-dimensional ways, we miss the deeper undercurrents of the friction between faith and practice which is the crux of so many of these conflicts.
When the Pharisees see Jesus’ disciples eating their food without going through the proper purification rituals, they are livid because a fundamental aspect of the law is being ignored.
While the phrase “cleanliness is next to godliness” isn’t actually in the Bible, it was the guiding principle behind the Pharisees’ statements here. Cleanliness or purity was a crucial part of how these Pharisees lived out their faith according to the law God gave to them through Moses. And the Pharisees were all about making sure you followed the law, because that was their primary way of relating to God.

One of the reasons for the emphasis on purity laws was practical. Things get dirty, including (and especially) hands, and it’s probably a good idea to make washing them a regular practice before you handle food or before you eat. (Along with all the utensils and everything else your food is going to come into contact with.)

I remember the training I received while working in the kitchen of a nursing home back in my college days.

During our lecture on preventing spreading disease and infection, we were instructed to sing “Happy Birthday” while washing our hands—that was the length of time required to assure our hands would be clean. There were a lot of other details on how to do it correctly and anyone who has worked in a hospital or similar facility knows how long and intricate such hand washing can be.

This makes sense to us in these circumstances and we know that hand washing, indeed washing of all kinds, is important and necessary for limiting the transfer of germs. (For example, I am very, very grateful that the surgeon and all the others involved in my husband’s recent shoulder surgery washed their hands—and sterilized the instruments!) The Jews of Jesus’ time believed that uncleanness was transferrable to other people, plates and cups, and clothes, so there were laws to make sure you didn’t transfer your “uncleanness.” After all, when you’re sharing your hummus with the guy who just trimmed his sheep’s hooves and then wiped his nose with his sleeve, you want to know he’s obeyed the purity laws!

Which is why, isn’t it, this story can seem so strange. Because far from sitting them down with soap and water and singing happy birthday numerous times, Jesus is doing something that your mother would never let you do: he’s telling them not to wash their hands.

Which, let’s all admit it, is kind of gross.

Jesus’s disciples are eating a meal, and they haven’t washed their hands. And if cleanliness is next to godliness, you would think that maybe Jesus would have gotten onto them about that. Maybe, if nothing else, he would have passed around a bottle of Purell? Jesus doesn’t call back to his disciples, “Hey guys…didn’t we talk about the singing ‘Happy Birthday’ thing?” He doesn’t turn and get mad at them. Instead he does something else.
He turns back to the religious authorities and flips the custom on its head. He begins by pointing out the hypocrisy of honoring God with their lips, but not with their hearts. Essentially, they give lip service to what they believe, saying the right things and performing little rituals that others will see. But when it comes to their hearts, they are far from true. And then he concludes by using a bit of “bathroom humor”: It’s not what goes into a person that makes them unclean. What makes someone unclean is what comes out of them.

But this bathroom joke is deadly serious and no laughing matter. Because some of the most famous martyr stories in Jesus’ world were about Jews who had been tortured and killed for refusing to eat unclean food. But Jesus has grasped something more, a deep truth about the way we humans are, which means that to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, he must take a different line, one that seems to break the rules. It’s not something they’re going to want to hear. We can do all the right things on the outside . . . but still have it all wrong, especially on the inside.

We all get, I’m sure, that Jesus is talking about what comes out of the heart. The purity laws, he’s suggesting, point to the real need of human for a deeper purity, a purity of motive.

Those who get stuck on regulations about food, and never progress to the real point, are quite literally missing the heart of the matter—the challenge and the mystery of the human heart.

Now it would be fairly easy to get a bit off course if we think that Jesus is trying to say that the physical world is bad and the spiritual world is good. At first glance, we might think that this is all he has to say—that the internal, spiritual things are what matters. That seems like a fairly straightforward religious message, and, what is more, that is a message that doesn’t disturb us.

But we would be wrong. What Jesus has to say should disturb us. Jesus is precisely not saying that external and physical things are irrelevant or bad and internal or spiritual things are good. He is not saying that if we get in touch with our deepest feelings, or learn to listen to what our heart is truly telling us, we will find our real identity and thereby discover happiness, fulfillment, or whatever. He is insisting that good and bad external, physical actions come from internal and spiritual sources. The poisoned wells of human motivation are the real problem to which the purity laws are pointing.
Basically what Jesus is saying is this,
“What good is it if you eat with clean hands but your hearts are dirty?
Better to eat with filthy hands and a clean heart.’”

It’s all too easy to get caught up in judging others
by the small customs and traditions of their faith such that we can’t see the good works
and the good intentions that come from those same hearts.
It’s really too bad when we do that because Jesus came to end all of that.
Not hand washing but the idea that the appearance of being holy is what makes us holy.

Have you ever thought to yourself,
“If people really knew me, they wouldn’t like me anymore?”
I think everyone does, whether we admit it or not.
We all believe that people would be shocked to know
that the persona we present on the outside,
and the truth about what we sometimes think and feel on the inside,
don’t always match.
We are disillusioned when we see hypocrisy in others,
but, unless we are sociopaths, we are terrified when we see these things in ourselves.
So much so, that sometimes we deceive ourselves.
We worry about appearances.
We keep our hands clean,
but our hearts get clouded by the demands of the world.
We want to do what we say we are going to do,
but when the rubber hits the road, . . . it’s hard.

The good news is that it is not our works, or our appearance, that saves us.
It is God’s grace, and forgiveness.
And though Jesus says nothing at this point in Mark’s gospel about his proposed cure
for the heart disease he has diagnosed,
Mark tells us that the good news is
that when we are touched by the Holy One with dirty hands
our hearts will be cleaned.

But the hard news is that if we really value that grace, if we are truly grateful for it,
then hand washing cannot stand alone.
External acts, symbolic acts, won’t cut it anymore.
Being a Christian demands more than that.
It demands not just our hands, though God surely needs those too.
Being a Christian disciple demands also our hearts.

A few years ago, a modern version of today’s gospel played out
quite literally in a public bathroom in Philadelphia.
One weekday morning, Pastor Violet Little was waiting on line at a public Ladies’ Room.
There were a long line of women waiting with her.
(Well, when is there not a long line at the Ladies’ Room?)
There were also one or two homeless women using the sinks to wash themselves.
Most of the women around Pastor Little began voicing not compassion or concern,
but great annoyance, disgust and rejection with statements that these women should not be using the public bathroom to wash—I guess because they were homeless, they were not part of the public or at least not the public that these housed and employed women were a part of. Pastor Little could not help herself. Full of compassion and generosity towards these women who had so little in comparison with her and the rest, she defended their right to use the bathroom to wash themselves. You could say that Pastor Little was exhorting them to wash their hearts along with their hands.

That encounter between Pastor Little and the homeless women didn’t end with her defense of them that morning. They befriended her and introduced her to other homeless people who were longing to hear God’s word and share a meal together. Over time, a congregation grew out of these boundary and rule breaking relationships, which has become The Welcome Church. A church without walls—one that could not find a sponsoring denomination until the ELCA welcomed them and recognized them officially as a developing congregation among the homeless. While it is officially an ELCA congregation, support now comes from a wide ecumenical group. This congregation serves and advocates for the homeless but their worship and service is open to everyone. Clean hands and dirty hands are employed together and everyone’s hearts are washed clean in God’s grace.

This week as we go back out into the world, how will we live as a Christian? How will our hearts match our action of coming to church this morning? Will it be a week empty of hand washing? Will our hands get dirty in service to the gospel?

This week, I pray that each heart be open to God’s will. That each heart be open to grace. And that we will show others what we believe, not by our clean hands, but by our loving hearts.

If you mess up, don’t worry. Rest assured, we all will mess up this week. But next week these pews will be right here waiting for us, and we can try again. Always, we can try again.

Oh . . . and one last thing—let’s all keep washing our hands anyway, especially in public places, after all, you never know what opportunities it might bring for us to proclaim the gospel!