

2024 Propers 17

Back in 2020, in those first weeks of figuring out how to navigate a pandemic, I was more than a little freaked out that people had to be told to wash their hands regularly. Just thinking about all the things that I touch after other people had me wanting to take a cue from Young Sheldon and wear mittens everywhere. I certainly started washing my hands even more frequently than I already did.

In a conversation with the wardens and vestry before we resumed in person worship, we spent a fair amount of time discussing the importance of me washing my hands before communion. I pointed out that I've been doing just that for *years* now, going out the sacristy and washing my hands while the rest of you pass the peace. I remember the amusement with which one of the wardens said, "Well, do it more showily—really make us SEE that you have just washed them!"

I think that if the wardens and I had been present at the encounter described in this morning's Gospel passage, we would probably have been on the side of the Pharisees! But that's putting a 21st century spin on a 1st century practice. They weren't worrying about germs or viruses. They weren't even worried about dirt.

This was a ritual washing, practiced by some—but *not* all—observant Jews. Nowhere in the Torah is this handwashing required of anyone but the priests under

very specific circumstances—a bit like the ritual washing I do after the offering has been brought up, just before I celebrate. That was probably originally a more thorough hand-washing, but has become a token, so that now the real germ-fighting scrub happens out of sight.

It's an example of the ways in which the purpose of a religious law can get lost in the practice of it.

In one of the offerings from the Sermons that Work website for this reading is a story attributed to the writer and spiritual teacher Anthony de Mello which I want to share.

When the guru sat down to worship each evening, the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshipers. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship. After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat died, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship. Centuries later learned treatises were written by the guru's disciples on the religious and liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed.

Doing the action without remembering the reasons for it can leave us with empty practice—and then a lot of energy spent trying to figure out some spiritual, theological explanation for it.

There is actually something really beautiful in the Pharisees' desire to see all people wash before eating. It took that holiness that only the priests experienced in the Temple at certain times of the year, and opened it up, extended to all the faithful Jews, no matter where they were. In later Christian terms, this would be described as "the priesthood of all believers," the promise that God does not require a mediator, that we can approach and engage the holiness of the present moment.

A more helpful example of this for us might be saying grace before a meal. A way of acknowledging our food as a gift from God, and stopping to become gratefully present in the moment. It's an excellent spiritual practice, if done mindfully and intentionally.

But if it's done by rote, raced through without any awareness, we're just doing it for show or as an obligation rather than an offering.

It's like we've kept the box but thrown away the gift.

And sooner or later, we start putting other stuff in the box, telling ourselves that as long as the box looks good from the outside, it doesn't really matter what is in it.

One of the reasons Christianity has such a bad rap these days is because in too many cases, the people claiming to be the holiest have filled their boxes with garbage.

The letter to James offers an alternative to the junk. “religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Growing up at St. Paul’s, Brunswick, we said a birthday prayer every week. You’ll recognize some of the phrases, I have incorporated them into our prayers.

Watch over thy child, O Lord, as her days increase; bless and guide her wherever she may be, keeping her unspotted from the world. Strengthen her when she stands; comfort her when discouraged or sorrowful; raise her up if she fall; and in her heart may thy peace which passeth understanding abide all the days of her life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As a kid, I thought that the prayer to be “unspotted from the world” was a request to hide me away from the eyes of the world—that I remain unseen. It was only as I studied this passage as an adult that I realized the prayer refers to this passage from James, which in the old King James Version uses that word, “unspotted.” The request isn’t to keep the child out of the eyes of the world, but to keep her from being permanently damaged while she makes her way through life. The power of that prayer, I think, is the acknowledgement that as strong as she is, she is still going to fall down sometimes, and need a hand getting back up. That there will be days when discouragement or sorrow drips down onto our clean little soul, but we don’t have to toss it out as irreparably

marred. The peace of God, which passes all understanding, helps soak it out. The grace of God that guides us, restores us, encourages us and strengthens us. Grace is the gift that originally came in those boxes I mentioned. Grace will flow back in and refill those old boxes; grace will present itself in new containers, if we have eyes to recognize them. Grace will be found in the little acts of care for others.

Grace just might show up as a cat wanting to curl up in your lap when you're trying to pray, and you'll wonder how you could ever have dismissed it as a distraction, rather than as a precious gift of engagement with the love that flows from God.

(You know how cats love boxes.)

Amen.