

“Heart Matters”

Introduction: We’ve noted in the past how often Jesus uses a meal, or food, to make a spiritual point. Even when anticipating and teaching about his death he gives us a meal to help us understand and reflect on that event. And, to anticipate that meal, and that event, we heard him declare last week, “I am the bread of life,” after which he goes on to talk about our need to “eat” his flesh and “drink” his blood (Jn 6:35, 53).

This morning, as he moves on from this whole bread of life discussion, or discourse, as it’s often called, we find him talking about food once again. But this time his focus is on what food does not do – it does not make one unclean in God’s sight. How you eat, or what you eat, does not make your heart right, or wrong, before God. Something else, someone else, Jesus implies, is needed.

The topic of spiritual cleanliness arises due to the arrival of the religious leaders, who have come to the north country from Jerusalem to check Jesus out. Was he for their way of life and teaching, or against? Let’s hear how the discussion unfolds and then think about what he might want to say to us. [READ]

I. The Tradition of the Elders

A. Evidently, word of his miraculous deeds had been spreading. You don’t heal the sick, change water into wine at a wedding reception, feed a crowd of thousands on a hillside, exorcise a demon, or even raise the dead, without the news spreading, and rapidly! Interestingly, when they arrived on the scene, the Pharisees and teachers of the law did not seem to want to know about the miraculous deeds of Jesus and what they might mean; they were worried that the disciples of Jesus hadn’t washed their hands before they sat down to eat!

B. Now, sadly, these leaders were not seeking to be good parents. A good parent, or so I’ve learned, before allowing you to hold their newborn baby, requests that when you come into their apartment, you wash your hands, to minimize the risk of passing on whatever germs you might be carrying. That doesn’t really strike us as odd or overly scrupulous today as nearly every public bathroom, including those at the church, has a sign reminding at least its employees to clean their hands before departing.

C. But this concern of the religious leaders has nothing to do with germs and good hygiene. It’s about religious hygiene, about a symbolic religious practice, about the construction of a tradition of ritual piety. Such a cleanliness tradition grew out of the Law of Moses, which specified that priests were to wash – hands and feet – before serving at the Temple. It was a symbol to remind them that they needed to be cleansed spiritually in order to be in the presence of a perfect and holy God (Ex. 30:17-21). But the scribes and Pharisees then began to apply this to the people as a whole and not only to their hands but also to their pots and pans! Without such washing, they could not worship with their faith community.

D. And so these leaders asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?” In answering, Jesus went right to the heart of the matter by drawing from the prophet Isaiah, identifying the leaders as

hypocrites who appeared to honor God with all of this washing stuff while failing to take care of their hearts, where actual uncleanness comes from. “Their teachings,” Jesus says, “are merely human rules.” As he goes on, he gives one such example of money that should have been used to care one’s parents in their old age – which was the law of God – held back with the excuse that it needed to be devoted in some way to God – which came out of a tradition in which the law had been manipulated to help worshippers hold on to their money!

E. Jesus then sums it up for the crowd, which had obviously been listening with interest: “Nothing outside can defile a person by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” Interestingly, the disciples think Jesus is speaking in parables, which they later ask him to explain, because what he had been saying for a proper focus of the life of faith was so revolutionary that they just assumed he was speaking metaphorically. He wasn’t. He was being literal. Food goes from the stomach to the outhouse and doesn’t affect our moral life, nor does washing your hands before you eat or your kettles before you cook. What causes moral uncleanness comes from the heart, the control room of our mind and will. This is what needs to be washed and transformed.

## II. The Source of Defilement

A. Now, on the one hand, we might say that the religious leaders had some good intentions. They were trying to help laypeople know what it looked like to live out a life of faith, and they were trying to protect their people from being overrun by the pagan influences that surrounded them. Jesus couldn’t have agreed more with these leaders about the fact that we are all unclean before a holy and righteous God. But he disagreed about the source of the uncleanness and about how to address it.

B. The problem, as he saw it, was that the leaders had begun to draw lines, identity markers, as to who was “in” and who was “out” – who washed their hands and who did not. And, they had begun to erect barriers that set them apart from the world and kept the world out. Like one of the buttons on your Google Maps app, Jesus came to re-center their understanding of purity from external activity to internal formation, as what is external won’t touch the real human problem.

C. And, as Mark doesn’t give us the answer yet as to what will help cleanse and re-form our hearts but seems to invite us to read on, know (“spoiler alert”) that Jesus had come, not to do away with but to fulfill the purity laws in Scripture – they were no longer needed because he has died to make us clean. He would want us now to make sure we are not developing traditions of our own that serve to keep others out, that we live not seeking to separate ourselves from those who are different but are willing to get mixed up in messes and with people who have messed up their lives.

So, how do we structure the church for those who do not yet attend? How do we include them in the family rather than exclude them? How do they come to know who Christians are – by our love or by our demand that they first clean themselves up before we reach out? Living without boundaries leaves us without an identity, but boundaries that are drawn too tightly choke out our love.

Likely you have heard this story but I m blessed and refocused every time I hear it. It is told by a fellow named Tony Campolo, a writer, Baptist pastor, and professor emeritus of sociology at

Eastern College in Philadelphia. Tony has preached here, and is a close friend of Craig Hammon, who has confirmed the truthfulness of this account:

Years ago, Tony made a visit to Hawaii. As his body was still on Eastern Time, he wandered into a diner at 3 am. The only other customers were some prostitutes, finished for the night. One of them, named Agnes, mentioned that tomorrow was her birthday, and that she had never had a birthday party in her life.

After the prostitutes left, Tony found out from Harry, the guy behind the counter, that they came to the diner every morning at 3:00. Campolo asked if he could come back the next night and throw a party for Agnes. Harry agreed, on the condition that he make the cake.

Here's Campolo's account of what happened:

*At 2:30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday Agnes!" The word must have gotten out on the street, because at 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was [there]. Wall to wall prostitutes ... and me!*

*At 3:30 the door to the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready, and when they came in we all screamed, "Happy Birthday!" Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted. Her mouth fell open, and her legs buckled. When we finished singing, her eyes moistened. When the cake was carried out, she started to cry.*

*Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Come on! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles." Finally, he did. The cutting of the cake took even longer. "Cut the cake, Agnes. We all want some cake."*

*"Look, Harry, is it OK if I keep the cake for a little while; if we don't eat it right away?" "Sure. If you want to keep it, keep it. Take the cake home if you want." "Can I?" Then, looking at me: "I just live down the street. I want to take the cake home, OK? I'll be right back."*

*She carried that cake out the door like it was the Holy Grail. We stood there motionless, a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?" Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes at a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do.*

*I prayed for Agnes. For her salvation. That her life would be changed. That God would be good to her. When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and said with a trace of irritation: "Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words come, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."*

*Harry waited a moment, and almost sneered as he answered, “No, you don’t. There’s no church like that. If there was, I would join it.”*

Isn't that the truth? Wouldn't we all join a church that overflows with grace for people who for one reason or another have made a mess of their lives? Here's the good news: That's the kind of church Jesus came to create, and which Mark 7 begins to form. Let's ask Jesus to help transform our hearts, that we might help make it happen.

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