

Sermon - August 23, 2015 - Pentecost 13

Clean Hearts over Dirty Hands

Mark 7:1–13



Dear Friend in Christ,

On July 1st, Cecil the Lion, a favorite of community in Zimbabwe and of many tourists that come to visit the park where Cecil lived, was killed by an American hunter who paid \$50,000 for his hunting guides to help him reach his goal.

The act was condemned by many. Many are angry over the death of Cecil the Lion. I do too, especially for the reason it was killed. I'm a nature lover, or so I and so I join the protest against this kind of killing.

But there is one thing that bothers me the most. Great noise was heard at the death of Cecil and condemnation and hate against the killer and those who helped him, yet when beings of greater value are abused, mistreated or even killed, we don't even hear about it.

In Zimbabwe alone the Human Rights Watch report that "Some 20,000 people, displaced by flooding from the Tokwe-Mukorsi dam in Masvingo province in February, were evicted and resettled with little government protection. They have not received adequate compensation, including land for resettlement, and were pressured to relocate to land with disputed titles. When displaced people protested in August, over 200 anti-riot police used excessive force and beat and arrested about 300 people; 29 were charged with public violence."

What about those killed by abortion, in Canada and all over? We don't hear about them. There is something wrong with the equation. Human life doesn't seem to be of value even with a Lion. Values have changed! Our own ideas have become more important. Maybe because of what is in our hearts, more precisely the condition of our hearts

Not much different to what we hear in our Gospel lesson today, where Jesus says tradition of clean hands doesn't equal the condition of a clean heart.

Clean hands are important. We expect any restaurant at least to provide the customer with a place to wash his or her hands. Hand sanitizers are popping up everywhere. Employers have strict policies about hand washing. Yet the question should be this, are our hands really clean?

In our Gospel reading we see how the people of the area receive Jesus with great excitement. Except those who were in authority who are really concerned with the contrast between Jesus' reception at the end of Mark 6 and his encounter with the ritual cleanness of his disciples' hands. Everything seems to be nice, people are excited about Jesus, and that's good, but too good for them when they see something wrong. Mark writes: "Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. . . . And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do

your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (vv 1–2, 5).

Traditions are important and good but do not override what’s most important, the human value as God intended for each one of us. In this case, the argument was not so much that the disciples didn’t wash their hands properly for hygienic reasons, but that they weren’t ritually clean to meet the Pharisees. Here we see not the human value but a selfish demand of respect, under the banner of the tradition of the Elders.

Jesus’ opponents seem to have completely lost sight of what really matters before God. The way they ask their question suggests that the root of the problem is that they’ve begun to put human concerns before and above what’s important in God’s eyes. Our initial sympathy with the Pharisees’ concern over clean hands at the table goes right down the drain when we begin to see the real problem in all its seriousness.

The problem with Cecil death is not so much that we are sad that a favorite lion was killed but there underlined problems, first the heart of the one who shot him dead, and second is an economical reason, now, no more tourists are coming to the park where Cecil used to live.

When I was a child wanting to pass “bath-time inspection,” I quickly learned that my mother was not going to check the easy-to-reach obvious places like my hands or my tummy. If I wanted to be declared “clean,” I had to make sure I washed behind my ears and between my toes. Our Lord reminds his questioners that they still need to learn this lesson. Centuries before, through his prophet Isaiah, the Lord had tried to teach Israel to check for true cleanness by considering their hearts: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (vv 6–7).

We may make the same mistake they were making if we miss the very important way Jesus introduces this quote from Isaiah. “Well did the prophet Isaiah prophesy of you,” Jesus says. Right after this, Jesus will speak of the Commandments God gave through Moses and how these ancient words of God should be shaping the lives and thoughts of his hearers. The Pharisees are more concerned about whether people’s hands are clean than whether their bodies have been cleansed of disease by the words of Jesus and whether their hearts have been filled with the peace Jesus is proclaiming. That’s exactly the sort of thing that happens when we stop asking what’s important to God.

You’ve heard the expression “lip service,” and you know what it means. Did you know that expression was inspired by this passage in the Gospels and by the passage from Isaiah Jesus quotes here? (That’s, at least, what the author of Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable says.) No one is impressed when our words are not supported by our actions and attitude. When we promised to do something yet we fail miserably. When with excitement we promised to do something and yet fall short of doing what we promised, or not even begun to do what we said we were going to do.

But there is another problem. Not so much of “lip service” but something like Judas attitude, of betrayal and duplicity. You know what I mean with this. Somebody greets you warmly—even with a handshake, or an embrace. But you know that deep down that person opposes you, even dislikes you. And you go: “what nerve does she have, ...”

That's the world we live in. Therefore Isaiah's words are prophesied about us, and Jesus' warnings speak to us, and if so, we had better examine our own lips and hearts and heads and hands to see how we're doing. How have we lost sight of what's really important? What traditions of men, what traditions of our own, have we let crowd out God's Word from its proper place as the Word that demands our total obedience? In what ways have we ceased to care about the hearts of those around us and taken, instead, to examining the cleanness of their hands? What things we have grown to like but that instead of edifying us in our faith and likeness of Christ have turned us into religious people that care only about what we like? What habits do we practice at home that we are proud and celebrate but instead obstacles our Christian faith and its growth?

The proof of the pudding is in the eating—whether your hands are washed or not! The wrongness of the Pharisees' approach is shown in the behavior that results. Replacing God's Word with man's, listening to human traditions that establish themselves at the cost of the honor due God's Word, results in a life lived only for self. Our Lord points to one of our most fundamental relationships to make this clear: "He said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die." But you say, "If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do'" (vv 9–13).

When our own voices and no others guide us, when our hearts are filled with self and far from God, even those dearest to us will suffer the consequences. Instead of gratitude, honor, obedience, and love toward those who have endured pain and deprivation to give us life, we look for excuses and loopholes so that we can be free of the burden of caring for our parents. Not only lions are killed for the pleasure of it, but even humans without the least or no remorse at all.

The contrast between images and definitions of marriage in our world today and the picture of marriage that Paul gives us in our Epistle from Ephesians 5 is just another example. Couples to be married may make a fuss over flows in their wedding ceremony because they wanted it to be so perfect, yet they don't make a fuzz over the time they have been living together, but they justify it!

But the list is long. Our hands may be clean, but our hearts are filthy.

Human traditions may set standards for outward cleanness, what is right and healthy, but they can never make us clean within, never make us right with Him, and never will lead us in a Godly way. Jesus points out the true source of the Pharisees' uncleanness because he wants to make them clean. This is clearly demonstrated in the casting out of the unclean spirit and the compassion Jesus shows the crowds in the accounts that follow (next week's Gospel, Mk 7:14–23). Jesus draws our attention away from human traditions, which cannot save us, to focus on God's Word, which can. God's words, spoken to us and for us, expose the "dirt behind our ears," the "dirt" we've been hiding in the hope no one would see, the "dirt" that gets in our eyes and blinds us to the needs of those around us, the "dirt" that clogs our hearts and shuts them down, the "dirt" that kills. But the point of all this is not so God can say, "Look, you're dirty!" Rather, our Lord calls us from human tradition to God's Word and His priorities and

letting His voice declare us clean, so that he can say, by his death on the cross, "Come to me, and I will make you clean." Amen.