

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Jesus has been busy. He's touched a leper and cleansed him, he's taken the hand of a young girl who has died and brought her back to life, he's placed saliva on the eyes of a blind man giving sight, he's taken five loaves and blessed them and broken them and fed five thousand people. He's been very busy and he has used his hands in ways that certainly break the tradition of the elders, his hands have been defiled. Now some of the Pharisees and scribes are quite upset with his disciples for eating with defiled, that is unwashed, hands.

It wasn't that the Pharisees and scribes were upset because of a lack of good hygiene, they weren't concerned about germs or infections. Now it's helpful to realize that the traditions of the elders were not based on Torah, or Law, but based on what we can call evolving oral tradition. At Jesus time, adherence to these oral traditions had taken on the same level of importance as adhering to Torah itself.

Jesus sets the oral traditions, the traditions of the elders, human tradition in contrast to God's commandment. It's not that the Pharisees and scribes are setting aside God's commandment, but they reject them by making a conscious choice against them. Jesus calls them hypocrites meaning they are playing a part, they voice lofty, noble sentiments that are divorced from the intentions of the heart. Human tradition has been substituted for the divine. As Isaiah prophesied about the hypocrites they honor God with their lips but their hearts are far from him, substituting human precepts for the word of God.

Then when Jesus is talking to the crowd he starts with "Listen to me". Remember faith comes from hearing, and Jesus wants them to listen to him, to hear him, to engage in something that he wants to be participatory, to be actively engaged in what he is going to say. Nothing from outside a person can defile a person, but what comes out are the things that defile. For from the heart come evil intentions, adultery, fornication, slander, pride, deceit, murder, avarice, evil things that come from within.

Slander, pride, deceit, avarice, all lead to bearing false witness, to stealing and coveting that which isn't ours. Adultery and murder are both named in the Ten Commandments. You may not have directly murdered anyone, but how are you doing on the rest of these?

"You abandon the commandment of God," Jesus says. We have the primary commandment, love the Lord your God, and the second like it as Jesus says, love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus adds another commandment to love one another as he has loved us. Has anything replaced God in your hearts? Can you love your neighbor if you bear false witness or neglect his or her basic needs? Have you spoken poorly of anyone who is a brother or sister in Christ? Your answer to any of these questions might be "yes" or "no", it might be "not lately", or it might be "maybe".

You know, we can wash our hands, our selves, all of us as thoroughly and as often as we like but this washing has no effect on what comes from within. But Jesus' hands give us a clue as to what we should be doing with our own hands. Feeding our neighbor the bread that maintains earthly life, touching lepers, the blind all those marginalized, belittled, ignored by the world and our society. Bringing hope and the word and hand of God to those without hope.

Brothers and sisters, our hands and hearts are cleansed when we are washed in the blood of the lamb that flows from Jesus' side and from the cross, blood that cleanses us and sets us free to be people of God. We are cleansed in the waters of baptism, in the Word of God, in the bread and wine at the Lord's Table, his body and blood. Our hands, our mouths, our hearts are cleansed. And we will praise and glorify God with our voices and hymns, and with our hands and actions as we serve him and his people.

AMEN