

## **Sermons at St. Luke's**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, August 30, 2009.*

Proper 17 year B

Wash your hands before you eat. We have been hearing this advice over and over lately. If you are trying to avoid the flu, it is very good advice. If you are trying to get closer to God, it might sound like strange counsel. Yet handwashing is the topic of a serious spiritual debate in today's Gospel lesson. The root of this debate is a question as old as religion itself: who is clean and who is unclean? Who is presentable before God and who is defiled, impure, polluted? Religious people have argued, fought, even killed over this question. The irony, of course, is that in trying to clean things up, religious people have made a lot of messes. Jesus reminds us that cleanliness or uncleanness begins in the heart. The heart is the seat of sin, and it is also the seat of love.

The strict religious observers of Jesus' time were offended that his disciples did not wash their hands properly before eating. Somewhere along the line, even though they were not Biblically commanded, it had been decided that in order to be clean and presentable before God, these washing rituals had to take place. So by ignoring the tradition, Jesus' disciples are, in the eyes of the religious, offending God. They are making a mess.

Jesus responds by going to the heart. He says it is not the things which go into a person that defile or make him or her offensive to God. We offend God when our hearts are filled with evil intentions, evil thoughts: with greed, envy, adultery, lewdness, lies, fornication, arrogance, stealing, murder, slander, pride, or foolishness. If we look at this list of defiling things, none of us are clean. Somewhere along the line we are bound to transgress. And it's interesting that Jesus uses the words, "evil intentions" or "evil thoughts" to describe what he's talking about. If we even think about lying or envy or wanting more than we need, then we are unclean. Jesus says in Matthew, chapter 5, that looking on someone with lust is an act of adultery in the heart. Remember the story in John chapter 8 about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery who was about to be killed by an angry mob. Jesus says, "Let anyone who is without sin be the first to throw a stone." Jesus' point, I think, is to get us to stop pointing the finger at who is clean and who is not. No amount of religious handwashing is going to make us presentable before God. We're all dirty and defiled in one way or another. So let's get off this debate about who is clean and who is not, because in our hearts, we're all a mess.

And yet the habit is hard to break. In many ways we have been conditioned to think in terms of clean and unclean. Now there is nothing wrong with making judgments about what is clean and unclean. It is important to have a sense of right and wrong, a sense of moral and immoral. We miss something, though, when this debate becomes the center of our spiritual lives. Our relationship with God is limited when the first question we ask ourselves is whether or not we've washed our hands correctly, whether or not we've been moral enough, good enough, whether we've been to church enough. This limits our relationship with God because it's more about us than it is about God. It's more about our performance for God than about our relationship with God. It's easy to fall into this way of thinking when so much of what we hear religious people talking about is how this person's moral compass is off or that person fell short or this person committed an outrage against the Lord. We love to point the finger. Even if we do recognize our own inner mess, we might be tempted to say, "Well at least I'm not as bad as that guy." That's why we feed on news stories about someone else's moral catastrophe. "At least I did not do THAT." The spiritual life becomes an exercise in performing well or at least not performing badly. I'm not saying this is what it's like for us all the time. I do think the way in which we relate to God has been impacted deeply by religious people continually expecting themselves and others to be perfectly clean.

So what is an alternative? If we pause the debate about clean and unclean for a moment, if we turn down the voices of judgment temporarily, what do we hear? I wonder if we might hear the voice of love. We

heard a reading this morning from the Hebrew scriptures, the Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon. For many of us, it was probably a bit strange sounding. Many of the more familiar passages in scripture tend to focus on that clean and unclean debate, about morality and immorality, righteousness and wickedness. But the Song of Songs has none of that. It is a love poem, a love song, if you will. Right in between Ecclesiastes and the prophet Isaiah, we interrupt these messages of wisdom and judgment to bring you a love song. The voices in this song are the bride and the bridegroom. In this morning's reading, we hear the voice of the bride as she anxiously awaits the arrival of her beloved. "The voice of my beloved! Look he comes leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills...my beloved speaks to me and says, "arise my love, my fair one and come away." Again, it may sound strange. First of all, it's poetry, and poetry has a way of sounding strange. And we may wonder what this is doing in the Bible. There's no mention of God. There's a lot of very sensual images which might be considered in the "unclean" category. Interpreters of the book over the centuries have compared the relationship between bridegroom and bride as the relationship between God and us. We are like the bride who is so excited to receive her beloved, who delights in being told "arise my fair one and come away." We long for closeness with God just as the bride longs for closeness with her beloved. Wait a minute. This is sounding stranger by the minute. Do we long for that kind of intimacy with God? Would we ever address God in the language of a love song? "I love you God, but I don't love you 'THAT' way!" I think for many of us, we are okay speaking to God as divine creator and benefactor, wisdom keeper, law giver, savior and healer. It is hard to imagine ourselves speaking to God with the words of intimacy. And yet here it is, the Song of Songs, stuck in our Bibles and often forgotten, reminding us that our relationship with God can be a love affair.

If the language of Song of Songs is perhaps a bit too racy or strange, consider the love song of Anglican priest George Herbert which we sang this morning (hymn 487). The third verse reads: "Come my joy, my love, my heart, such a joy as none can move, such a love as none can part, such a heart as joys in love." These words, addressed to God, describe a relationship that is rooted not in judgment but in love, not in righteousness but in joy. It's not that we stop thinking about right and wrong. It's not that we don't confess our unclean-ness. But our concern with our defiled state grows out of the joy and the love we share with our loving God. We love God and so we place our whole, dirty selves before God. So often it's the other way around, and we think that joy and love comes from doing the right thing and having a clean heart. The trouble is, our hearts are always a mess. We're never clean enough for God. But what God wants from us first is our love, not our spotlessness. What God wants from us first is our devotion, not our devout observance of custom. When we love God, when we are in love with God, God will cleanse our hearts, grafting into them the love of God's name. Our devout observance will flow, not as some kind of duty but as a joyful fulfillment of service.

But what if we don't feel THAT way about God? How do we fall in love with God? Falling in love is not easy when so many religious people want to talk about righteous handwashing. Falling in love is not easy when we may have never thought it was possible. Maybe we try it out like a date. Can we make a date with God? Can we arrange a time to get away from the voices of judgment and duty for a while and just enjoy the company of our Lord? No agenda, no need for fancy clothes or an impressive venue. Maybe just an evening on the couch, a morning cup of coffee, a lunch just to be together, to offer our defiled and loving hearts. If we cannot find words, we can just sit in silence. If we find ourselves stuck, we can ask for help, knowing that God desires us so much more than we can ever desire God. Maybe we can just ponder again and again the words of the poet: "Come my joy, my love, my heart, such a joy as none can move, such a love as none can part, such a heart as joys in love."