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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
Proper 16, Series B (Pentecost 13)  
Saturday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021  
Sunday, August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021

Sermon: Heart Hygiene – Part 1  
Texts: Mark 7:1-13; Isaiah 29:11-19

Focus: Human traditions do not gain us favor with God.

Function: That they would draw near to God with hearts cleansed by Jesus' blood.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it" (SC, Explanation of the Third Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Throughout the covid-19 pandemic, we have received constant admonition to wash our hands regularly and properly. Signage posted in every public bathroom serves as a constant reminder of our hygienic duty to the rest of humanity.

Early on in the pandemic, I heard a number of people joke how disturbing it was that people had to be told to wash their hands. Those people obviously have never been in a men's restroom, where, I would estimate, at least one-third of men do not wash their hands at all after taking care of business. Another third wash—but only with water, *not* soap. Only the remaining third actually wash their hands with soap and water. In other words, the vast majority of American men do *not*, in fact, know (or care) how to wash. *Yuck!* I don't even want to know what goes on in the ladies' room.

In today's Gospel lesson, handwashing is at the heart of the disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees:

"Now when the Pharisees gathered to [Jesus] 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. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders...)” (Mark 7:1-3).<sup>1</sup>

The Pharisees were big on handwashing, but not for the same reasons that doctors and nurses recommend. For the ancient Jews, handwashing was not a matter of personal hygiene or public health, but rather a matter of *ceremonial* cleanliness. They believed that it was an offense against God and heaven to eat without proper washing, which was an elaborate ritual with several proscribed steps, including full submersion, pounding the palm with the fist of the other hand, and allowing the water to run down to the upraised wrists. Anything less than this was a terrible sin.

A few months ago I preached about clean and unclean *foods*, but the Pharisees went *waaaaaaaaaaaay* beyond the holiness codes of the Old Testament. By the first century, the Rabbis had come to believe that their traditional laws (called *Halakhah*, from the Hebrew word for “walk”), served as a kind of fence around God’s Law. The Talmud and Mishnah required stricter observance and purity than the Torah itself. And so, if one could keep the *Halakhahs*, one would not transgress the Law given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Indeed, the Pharisees and scribes believed that the oral tradition of their elders bore not only the same authority as Scripture itself, but that to violate a *Halakhah* was a worse sin than to break one of the Ten Commandments.<sup>2</sup>

So the question of the Pharisees put to Jesus was more of an accusation than a question. “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (Mark 7:5). It was a fierce attack against Jesus and his followers. As I have shown, in

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, 480.

the eyes of the rabbis, Jesus' disciples, by breaking with Jewish tradition, were flaunting their sin before the heavens. How could a Jewish rabbi such as Jesus abide such abomination?

Yet in Jesus' response, he neither defended nor decried his disciples' actions. Rather, he turned the tables on the scribes and Pharisees, pointing out their religious hypocrisy. Quoting from Isaiah 29 (today's Old Testament lesson), Jesus declared, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men'" (Mark 7:6-7). In other words, the Pharisees only gave lip service to God's commands but did not actually love and follow him. Their hearts were far away from God. They worried about whether or not Jesus' disciples ate with unwashed hands, but their own *hearts* were unclean. They should have been more concerned about heart hygiene—their souls.

To prove his point, Jesus gave just one example. The Fourth Commandment declares, "Honor your father and your mother" (Mark 7:10; cp. Ex. 20:12). Yet the *Halakhah* allowed that if a man devoted himself to serving God, then he no longer was bound to offer any service to his parents. Supposedly, this was a great sacrifice, an offering to God (Corban was the Hebrew word). But in reality, it was a religious way to be let off the hook for helping your parents. No longer would you need to take them to doctor's appointments or pick up their groceries and prescriptions. No longer would you need to help them out around the house or care for them when they were sick. All that was Corban! It belonged to God now. So this vow actually made it impossible for them to honor their parents and carry out God's commands. In other words, the Jewish traditions allowed people to violate God's commands in order to carry out tradition.

This infuriated Jesus. No wonder that he declared: “You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men... You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ...And many such things you do” (Mark 7:8-9, 13b).

It would be easy for us to laugh at the rigidity of rabbinic traditions and write off this Gospel lesson as a relic from another age with little or nothing to say to us today in the twenty-first century. But we would be wrong to do that.

For whether we like to admit it or not, every Christian denomination and congregation has its own traditions. For example, you’re not supposed to say or sing Alleluia during Lent. We stand for the Gloria Patri and any Trinitarian verse in a hymn. We light an Advent wreath on the Sundays leading up to Christmas. We pour the water in Baptism—never immerse! You must kneel at the Communion rail—or else! And you sing “Were You There” on Good Friday at Immanuel Lutheran Church of Englewood, Colorado!

I nearly transgressed tradition during my first Holy Week at my previous congregation. A few minutes before the Good Friday service was to begin, the head elder came up to me with a desperate question: “Who is going to sing ‘Were You There’ at the end of the service?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked in puzzlement.

“The hymn,” he answered, ♪ “‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’ And all that.”

“I know the hymn,” I said, “but why are you asking who is going to sing it? It’s not in the bulletin. We didn’t put it in the service.”

His eyes widened in alarm. “But we *have* to sing it!” he proclaimed. “We *always* sing ‘Were You There’ on Good Friday.” (*Aside:* For many Christians, tradition is always the main

justification for a church practice. Either “we always do it this way” or “we never do it that way” is the most common objection to change).

Unfortunately for me, nobody had *informed* me about the sacred tradition of singing “Were You There.” And finding out just moments before the service began was not very helpful. I immediately came up with a simple solution: this year **I** would sing the hymn as a solo at the end of the service. That way, everyone’s expectations were met and our Good Friday service would be good, right, and salutary in the eyes of the Lord.

Did we really have to sing “Were You There?” No, of course not. There are many good hymns and contemporary Christian songs suitable for Good Friday. None of them are commanded in Scripture.

The theological term for this is *adiaphora*, a Latin word that literally means “indifferent matters”—things neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. As Christians we have a tremendous amount of freedom in the way that we worship God and organize our congregations. The Lutheran Confessions uphold this point:

“For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be the same everywhere” (AC VII, 2-3).

We may not hold to the *Halakhah*, the “traditions of the elders” (Mark 7). But we have our own traditions in Lutheranism. Yet these “human traditions,” which are “instituted by men,” do not need to be observed uniformly throughout all our churches. They are *adiaphora*, things neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. If God doesn’t say, “You must do this” or “You can’t do that,” then we are free to do what seems best to our own conscience and for the benefit of our church community.

Here's another example: what is the pastor supposed to wear for worship? Ordinarily, I wear a clerical collar with an alb (white robe) and stole (the colorful "sash" that symbolizes the pastoral office). At the contemporary service, I usually just wear a clergy shirt and a suit. But I know other Lutheran pastors who wear a full chasuble, a kind of beautifully embroidered cape cut from brocade fabric and worn over the other vestments. Yet if I were to don a cassock or a chasuble, you would probably say that it was too "Catholic."

I know other Lutheran pastors who only wear a shirt and tie on Sunday mornings—or even just khakis and a polo shirt. If I were to do that, some of you would probably start attending another church, claiming that I was being "irreverent" or "disrespectful." And yet all of it is adiaphora, a matter of no importance to God, who never commanded in Scripture what a pastor is supposed to wear. Quite honestly, if I were to wear a T-shirt and gym shorts on Sunday morning, while it might offend some of you, it would make absolutely no difference whatsoever to God. If you're really going to get that hung up about what the pastor—or other people—wear to church, then your heart is not in the right place. You honor God with your lips, but your heart is far from him.

But people get very emotional about their traditions. It's not long before people erroneously believe that unless they observe certain traditions, then they are doing something wrong or sinful—and offensive to God. Then their traditions become idols, and if somebody wants to do away with a tradition or inadvertently neglects it, he or she becomes guilty in the eyes of others within the congregation. They are no longer a "good Lutheran."

There may be very practical or logical reasons to observe certain traditions. Some traditions are even helpful for teaching the Gospel. But when people don't understand a tradition

and still insist upon it, or when it gets in the way of people coming to Jesus, then the tradition must go. Otherwise, our worship is in vain, for we are “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:7). By insisting that our traditions are the only God-pleasing way to do things, we make a new law and try to justify ourselves before God on the basis of works righteousness. Our traditions become the “good works” necessary to earn—or keep—God’s favor, and then we lose the Gospel. We honor God with our lips, but our hearts are far from him (Mark 7:6). We are sinning.

No human tradition is on par with Scripture. And just because they used to do something at the church where you grew up in Nebraska or Minnesota doesn’t mean that we’re going to keep the same tradition here in Castle Rock, Colorado.

Martin Luther had a rather stubborn personality, and he took a particular tact when it came to adiaphora. Luther did not insist that every Lutheran church had to sing the same liturgy or keep the same customs. He believed in—and staunchly defended—the principle of Christian freedom when it came to adiaphora. Yet, as soon as somebody insisted that you *have* to do something a certain way not indicated in Scripture, Luther would take a very different tact. Now, to defend my Christian freedom, as soon as your tradition becomes a law and not merely a suggestion, I am bound by conscience to do *the exact opposite* of what you insist upon in order to prove that you are wrong. (*Aside: If you recall the story from last week of Luther’s encounter with Zwingli, you will remember that Luther had a strong personality*).

There is only *one* tradition which we must hold onto for dear life: the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For that is what St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Cor. 15:3-5).

The Greek verb for “deliver” (*paradidōmi*) in this passage is related to the Greek noun for “tradition” (*paradosis*). Technically, in its most basic meaning, a tradition is something handed over or handed down from one person or generation to the next. Both words are used in Mark 7:13: “your tradition that you have handed down.”

Paul delivered to us—he “handed down to us”—the tradition of the Gospel: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The thing most essential in the Church is that we hold onto this message—the hope and forgiveness it brings—and hand it over to the next generation of believers. Jesus died. He came back to life. And then he showed up for dinner.

No human tradition is more important than the Word of God. And no human tradition that conflicts with the Word of God—or gets in the way of lost sinners coming to Jesus—can be kept in good conscience.

Jesus did not come to create a new Law or to force us to keep man-made traditions. Jesus came to forgive our sins and set us free from the condemnation of the Law. He seeks people who will worship him “in Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23). For “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17). As a forgiven sinner, you are *free!* “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.... For you were called to freedom, brothers [and sisters]. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” (Gal. 5:1, 13). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.