

In the name of the God who calls us to follow, just as Jesus followed, Amen.

“Did you wash your hands?” How many times have I asked that question? In fact, how many times have Donna and I asked that question in the last *week*? In our case, the question is generally followed by, “With soap?” Taylor is pretty good about remembering to wash her hands when she leaves the bathroom. But the “soap part” gets lost sometimes. In this morning’s Gospel reading, the Pharisees ask Jesus a slight variation on this question: “Why *don’t* your followers wash their hands?”

This is one of the few times in the Gospels where many of us can identify with the Pharisees. After all, if you don’t wash your hands before you eat, you run the risk of all kinds of infectious organisms taking over your body. The Centers for Disease Control have been saying recently that good hand washing is the single best way to keep from getting sick during flu – or any other – season. So ... the Pharisees had Jesus on this one, didn’t they? I mean, seriously, look at Jesus’ response to them. He is just patently wrong. “[T]here is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

Sorry Jesus, but this time you lose. Things that go into our bodies definitely DO defile. Viruses and bacteria; upon entering our bodies, can make us sick. If that’s not defilement, I don’t know what is. But this is one of those times where context is

everything. Looking at these couple of lines, lifted without context from Mark's Gospel, we would think that Jesus had lost His mind and the Pharisees had won a round. But check out the context.

First, the people of Jesus' day had no idea about bacteria – much less viruses. It would be another 1600 years before Louis Pasteur would discover germs. And it would be years after that before people believed that germs caused illnesses. In the 1700s there were still many doctors who never washed their hands before surgery. And it was almost 1900 before the first virus was discovered. So, clearly this is not what the Pharisees were talking about. It wasn't what we hound Taylor about – being hygienic – because they had no concept of that. No, this was something else entirely.

When we set the Holy Table before the Eucharist, the last thing that I do before accepting and blessing the oblations, and starting the *versum corda*, is to have the acolyte pour a little water over my fingertips. It's not that my hands are then hygienically clean, it's about the little prayer that I pray while the water goes over my fingers and I wipe them dry. It's from Psalm 51 and it goes, "Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me."

You see, what the Pharisees were talking about was the ritual action – the pouring of the water over the fingertips. But what Jesus was talking about was the prayer. The Pharisees believed that if the people could follow all of the rules that they had placed

before them; if they could remember to ALWAYS pour a little water over their fingers before they ate, they would be justified – or righteous – in the eyes of God. Jesus said, “I don’t care if they use the water or not. It doesn’t make them clean. I care about whether or not they have the prayer in their hearts.” For the Pharisees, it was about what people could see them doing on the outside. For Jesus, it was about what was on the inside, controlling the actions of the outside.

The theology Jesus taught on this issue takes full form in the Epistle of James, which we started reading this morning. James writes, “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” In other words, it is not enough to say that you are a Christian, you must act like one as well. Of all of the writers of New Testament Epistles, it is James who gives the most practical advice to his readers. He says, over and over, in many different ways, “if you’re going to talk the Christian talk, you had better walk the Christian walk.” So, what does it mean to walk the Christian walk, as James – and Jesus – would have us do?

Jesus demands *love* – both of self and of neighbor. Loving a neighbor in this sense means caring for “orphans and widows” in their “distress.” In the tradition of the Old Testament wisdom literature, orphans and widows are a metaphor for anyone who is poor or in need. So what Jesus demands of us as His disciples is: to share what we have with those who have less. But what does that mean on a day-to-day basis?

The author of the Letter of James calls on us to live out our Christian beliefs in everything we do. That means, among other things, giving to the Church so that its good works can be carried out. We in the Episcopal Church have gotten used to living as though we never have to talk about money. To us, it is sort of unseemly – some might even say tacky – to talk about what, or how much someone gives to the Church. But Jesus didn't hesitate to talk about such things.

Remember the stories from three of the four Gospels of the young man who came to Jesus and asked what he needed to do inherit the Kingdom of God? Jesus told him to sell all he had and give everything to God. We like to walk gingerly past that story, saying, “well, Jesus must have meant it for that man, not for me.” But I think there is something in the story that is useful for us. It is not some part of what you have that God wants as an offering. It is EVERYTHING you have EVERYTHING you are that God wants.

James tells us to walk the walk as we talk the talk. We all talk about love of God and love of neighbor. It is time to start asking the hard questions of ourselves. Do we REALLY love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength? And do we REALLY love our neighbors? If so, than it's time that we started to live that way. Whether it is giving money to an individual who is in need, or giving to the church, it is the act of giving – that which comes from the heart – that God desires.

Pray about this during the week. In the weeks to come we will begin our stewardship campaign. Make a commitment to attend church, to go to the adult education hour, to follow the progress of the campaign, and to pray for wisdom about how God wants you and your neighbors to respond. Then make a commitment –a pledge – to the Church. Pledge to share your time and your abilities. That is an important way to walk the walk. But remember – as Tracie so eloquently pointed out last week – money has power over us. So you should also pledge to begin to break the hold of that power by giving to God FIRST; before you pay Mastercard, before you pay the car payment, before you buy that item that you’ve had your eye on. Respond to God’s call with a faithful witness of your love of God and neighbor. God gave it all to you. Give it back with the gratitude that the gift should engender.

James says, “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose *he* gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” That’s the talk. Can you walk the walk? Amen.