

Narrative Lectionary- What Defiles?
February 16, 2020

I grew up in a religious context where, if you were going to please God, there were a lot of dos and don'ts. Some of you might have had a similar upbringing. We couldn't play cards (I think they had something to do with the devil, or maybe it might lead to gambling). My parents worried about misusing alcohol, so they did not drink at all. Dancing was not allowed, because dancing might lead to something else (We were curious of course what the something else might be).

What I came to realize when I grew up was that my parents' hearts were in the right place. They really wanted to protect us kids from harmful activity. So what they did was they put a fence around certain activities. They were afraid of alcoholism, but instead of drinking in moderation, they put a fence around alcohol and said, We won't ever go there.

As we grew up, they told us that sex was a beautiful gift that was to be enjoyed in a loving, committed relationship, but to be sure we didn't stray, they said, No dancing, which could stir up passions. They put a fence around everything.

This is what the religious people of Jesus' day had done with the Law of Moses. About 500 years before Jesus, a group of religious scholars called the scribes decided that the Law of Moses needed to be protected, so they came up with laws around the law, laws to protect the law. They wanted to define everything, so they came up with hundreds of law around the Jewish law. This came to be known as the oral law. Ceremonial hand washing was one of those laws. This wasn't done just to clean the germs off your hands. This was a ceremony to be set apart, to be ritually clean.

William Barclay, the New Testament scholar, has a list of what the Law of Moses said was unclean- "A woman after child-birth was unclean; a leper was unclean; anyone who touched a dead body was unclean. And anyone who had so become unclean made unclean anything he in turn touched. A Gentile was unclean; food touched by a Gentile was unclean; any vessel touched by a Gentile was unclean. So, then, when a strict Jew returned from the market place he immersed his whole body in clean water to take away the taint he might have acquired. Obviously vessels could easily become

unclean; they might be touched by an unclean person or by unclean food.” So laws grew up around the laws.

There was some disagreement among the Jews about hand washing, and how much of it to do. But this particular group of Pharisees and scribes that sees Jesus in this story has a very strict view. The hands would be washed this way- with fingers pointed up, water was poured over the hands. Then the fist was dug into the palm of the other hand. The other hand was ceremoniously washed this way. Then the fingers were pointed down, and the same process happened. Again, this wasn't just about getting hands clean. This was a ritual purification. They saw this as pleasing God.

And they notice that Jesus and his disciples do not ceremonially wash their hands before they eat. That to them means their hands are defiled. So the Pharisees ask, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’

We're going to hear this word *tradition* five times in this story. These religious folks have their tradition that has been added to the Law of Moses. They have built a fence of their own traditions around the law. So Jesus throws it back at them with a quote from the prophet Isaiah- ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’

Jesus says, God has told us what is important, and how to act towards our neighbor. You have abandoned that and created a whole series of rules that are beside the point. I always invite us to think about the context of a passage of scripture. Was Jesus ignoring the Jewish law? No- he was observant of the law. We get a clue about this in the story before, when their boat lands ashore, and a bunch of people mob them and bring the sick for him to cure. ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’

Observant Jews wore fringes on their garments called tzitzits. This comes from the Law of Moses, in Numbers 15, which says- “The LORD said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners

of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God.”

Jesus wears these tassels- he does so to remember the Law of Moses, but of course he will fulfill the law in some new ways, sometimes in some deeper ways. And he will move past the law when it keeps him from reaching out to help his neighbor. In the story after this, Jesus helps a Syro-phenician woman whose daughter has a demon. He shouldn't go near a Gentile according to the law. But he breaks these laws of clean and unclean to do God's work.

After this story, at the beginning of chapter 8, he is in the Decapolis again, the ten Gentile cities. Many years before, the Jewish people had been told that when they were coming into Canaan, they were to annihilate seven Canaanite tribes. So what does Jesus do when he goes into the land of the Gentiles? He teaches these neighbors, and when they are hungry, he performs another miracle, and he feeds them.

When he performs this miracle in Judea, there are twelve baskets of food left, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. When he performs this miracle with the Gentiles in the Decapolis, there are seven baskets of food left over, symbolizing these descendants of the seven tribes. Instead of killing the enemy, Jesus is feeding the enemy. And these scribes and Pharisees are ceremoniously washing their hands. No wonder he is angry.

Then he gives them an illustration of this. He says, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, “Honor your father and your mother”; and, “Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.” But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban” (that is, an offering to God)— then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.’

Corban was a tradition that said that you could shelter a portion of your income and call it an offering to God, but then you could use it any way you wanted. Jesus says, You ought to be honoring your parents, who need some financial help. That's what the fourth commandment says. But you claim Corban with your money, so you won't have to help your father and mother. You're creating your own traditions so you can get out of really obeying the commandments. You can see why Jesus was frustrated.

Then he takes on another related issue- "He called the crowd again and said to them, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.'

When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, 'It is what comes out of a person that defiles.

Jesus does away with the dietary laws at this point, those portions of the law that told the Jewish people what they could and could not eat. Jesus says, What you eat or don't eat doesn't make you clean or unclean. It is what comes out of the heart that causes problems, and then Jesus has a long list of things- fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

Let's take this beyond food. What are the things that we might think "go into us" that could defile us? Some kind of trauma? Some kind of suffering? Some identity that is hard to shake? Jesus says, None of these outside things that happen to us can defile us, can make us unclean, can make us unworthy.

And later in the New Testament, Paul calls the church the *body* of Christ. Nothing that comes into the body of Christ from the outside can defile us.

Do you remember when the woman with the issue of blood touches the fringe of Jesus' garment? That should have made him unclean. But no, she is healed. Jesus says, That which comes into the body does not defile. It is that which comes out of the heart.

Let's take this issue of things coming from outside into the body to a larger scale. We have such divisions in our country now over immigration. I've been reflecting on what I heard a commentator say the other day, that we should have high walls and big doors. In other words, let's have control of our borders, but let's be really welcoming. But we have worried about those from the outside "defiling us" from our beginning. We have always been wary of the outsider who is coming in, we who are all outsiders, other than the Native Americans here.

Ben Franklin was worried about German immigrants in the 1700s. This is what he said in a letter from 1753- "Few of their children in the country learn English... The signs in our streets have inscriptions in both languages ... Unless the stream of their importation could be turned they will soon so outnumber us that all the advantages we have will not be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become precarious."

He said it would be ok to let in a small number of Germans, because they "have their virtues," but he worried that the ones who had arrived were "generally of the most ignorant stupid sort of their own nation," and would bring the country down if they continued to immigrate. Are we in fear from that which comes from the outside?

Jesus calls us again today to see what's really important. He was accused by religious types for not taking hand washing seriously, and he says, Really? That's what it's all about? You remember when one of these scribes comes up to him in Mark chapter 12 asks him to name the most important law, Jesus says, Love God with everything you have, and love your neighbor as yourself. That's what's really important.

I don't know what that means for you this week. Maybe it means listening to a neighbor you disagree with. We're not only partisan these days, but we get so angry about things. What if we lowered the volume and really listened; what if we tried to hear why someone believes the way they do? Maybe loving our neighbor this week means we as a congregation continue to discern where the Spirit is calling us to use our building and our property to serve our neighbors. All I know is, I just don't want to be like the religious-types in this story, who get caught up in the ceremony and the meaningless ritual, and somehow ignore their neighbor in need. Amen.