

Bill Countryman

Good Shepherd Berkeley

September 30, 2009

13th Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 17B: Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

## SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH CLEAN HANDS?

So what's the problem here about washing your hands? Mostly, people think it's a good idea. With all the anxiety about swine flu, we'll all be getting a lot of pressure about it this fall. Admittedly, there have been some Christian ascetics who gave up bathing altogether, but then there are other people who even claim that cleanliness is next to godliness. Jesus's questioners in the gospel reading this morning might have said, "No, it's actually a part of godliness."

Well, of course, hand-washing isn't the real subject of this passage. It's about something else. It's about the way people get fixated on rules and boundaries. It can happen to anybody, to religious people and non-religious people, to conservatives and to liberals. We use the rules to divide insiders from outsiders, people of one social class from another, the educated from the uneducated, highbrows from lowbrows and so forth and so on.

If we look around at Episcopalians—why pick on somebody else when we have such riches at home?—we find that sometimes we get very focused liturgical rules. We want everything done just so. There are right ways and wrong ways—far more wrong ways than right ways. And when things are not being done just right, we may find it hard to worship. And we may tell you about it.

Or there are Episcopalians who have a very particular way of understanding the scriptures. The Bible allows you to do X, but not Y. And if you do Y, you are wrong and it may be doubtful that you should be a part of the church at all.

Or there are Episcopalians for whom church manners are the main thing. In a few places, I understand they still insist that women

wear hats, but in most places it's more a matter of, say, children being too fidgety or people bringing water bottles into church.

Again there are Episcopalians for whom inclusive language is very important. And if you violate those rules, you will evoke groans of dismay. If you persist, you may even get your ears singed.

Now I choose these examples precisely because I've practiced all of them myself at one time or another. And I've also gotten caught out by other practitioners. And it isn't easy for me to give up enforcing them on others, even when I'm irked about having them enforced on me.

I always kind of welcome an example of this sort of thing that I'm *not* entangled in. My Aunt Audean was a really sweet and lovely woman who was a nurse and also taught piano. And she was a devoted Methodist of a fairly conservative sort. I remember her talking, years ago, about two girls who were new piano students. They were good at it and serious about it; and she was completely charmed by them. "But," she said, "isn't it a shame that their father owns a liquor store?"

It caught me by surprise. I had forgotten that the rule of capital-T temperance would be so important for her. And it was almost—happily, not quite—enough to erase everything else about those girls.

It's not the rule about hand-washing that Jesus was attacking this morning. It's the way religious people sometimes have of applying the rules. The rules may be perfectly good (or they may not; there's no guarantee). But once they become the main thing, they become dangerous.

Now, why dangerous? They're dangerous because they distract us from what's really important in religion—and in human life generally. They distract from what lies at the heart of life at its best. They distract us from love.

What a treat this morning to have a reading from Song of Solomon (or, as it's also called, Song of Songs):

Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away;  
for now the winter is past,

the rain is over and gone.  
The flowers appear on the earth;  
the time of singing has come. . .

There's where the center of human good lies. There's where the center of faith lies.

Song of Songs is a book of love poetry. It may have started out as just that and no more, but Jews and Christians alike have seen in it the perfect metaphor and the perfect language for the relationship of faith and trust between God and us. God invites us to run away with him or her—take your pick—in the springtime, with flowers in bloom and birds singing.

Human beings need people we love and people who love us in order to survive and grow and come to any sort of fruition. It turns out God wants to be part of that interchange, too. God made the world in order to make love and friendship possible. And God extends the offer of love and intimate friendship to every one of us, without exception.

That's the heart of the Christian religion and also the occasion of our biggest problem with it. God says, "Let's run away together and enjoy life with each other." We say, "Well, yes, but let me just gather some flowers first and pack a lunch and chill a bottle of nice chardonnay—and wash my hands."

Now, all these things are good. The flowers are good. Lunch is good. A nice chardonnay is, in my opinion, good, though others, like Aunt Audean, will have other preferences. Washing your hands is good. The problem is that they can all turn into means of avoiding the really important thing: the opportunity for love, the opportunity for intimate friendship.

Amazingly enough, even the passage we read from James this morning reinforces this message. It's a really beautiful piece. It starts off reminding us of how God seeks us out and gives us existence through love. James talks about God as our father: "the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change," from whom comes "every perfect gift." Then James goes on to talk

about God as our mother, who "gave us birth through the word of truth."

And what does this tell us about our own lives? James tells us the authentic faith is to practice the same sort of gift-giving with one another. The passage concludes: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God . . . is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." That last bit about being "unstained" doesn't mean "And be sure to wash your hands." When you read James closely, you realize that it means "Act out of love. Don't let your life get stained by anger or arrogance or hatred or spite."

Jesus and James agree that the real, serious defilements of human life are the moments when we yield to hostility, to the temptation to shove other people away. Even if we are invoking good rules such as "Wash your hands," if we do it to show how good we are, how pious, how faithful, how right (and how terrible those other people are), then we are the ones who are defiled—not the people who forgot to wash.

We do it anyway, of course. We're human beings. Even when we're trying hardest, we get things wrong. Sometimes *especially* when we're trying hardest. . . .

The antidote to that is to remember who we really are: people who've been invited into intimacy with God. The joy of that love and friendship is the most wonderful thing in life. True faith is joy, not a set of rules.

So relax! God loves you. Oh, and wash your hands, sure. Just don't get hung up on it.