



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## Create in Us a Clean Heart

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 2, 2012*

*The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

Jesus' ministry is going very well at this point in Mark's Gospel. A lot of things have happened that have made Jesus a person of great renown. Potent preaching. Spectacular healings. Mass feedings. The casting out of demons. Big things have happened. And even bigger things are coming. Jesus has yet to speak up about how he will be going to Jerusalem to show forth the truth and to be rejected by the elders of his faith. It is quite clear that this rejection is going to happen, because Jerusalem hasn't even bothered to wait for him to come to them. Jerusalem has come to Jesus. They have sent a contingent of scholars and honored lay ministers on the five-day journey to Galilee to investigate Jesus' ministry.

But they do not come seeking wisdom. They come ready to draw close to Jesus to catch the slightest error or flub. And then to take that error and lift it on high as a way to delegitimize Jesus and his work, and also to legitimize their style of ministry. And if they find something especially egregious, why, Jesus can be lynched on the spot, if they are lucky. These "gotcha politics" should be very familiar to us in our time, and they also confront Jesus throughout the Gospels. And, until the bitter end, he works to outmaneuver the veiled malice of his opponents.

In this case, the scribes and the Pharisees are present with Jesus during a day of his ministry, watching and waiting for anything that could provoke a scandal. They notice during a meal that some of the disciples haven't washed their hands properly, according to the practice of the faithful. And this washing has less to do with being free from disease, and more with being right with the Lord. The norm was that, while speaking a prayer, you would hold up your hands and have someone pour water over them. In this way, the dirty water would run down one's arms to drip from the elbows and not from the tips of one's fingers, to keep them clean. But at this meal, some of the disciples don't wash their hands. Even though some of the disciples do. Even though Jesus does. No matter. This is where the scribes and the Pharisees take their chance to pounce.

Now, from our perspective, it may seem obviously silly or phony that they would think this was so important and that they would have chosen this as their point of attack. Who cares if a little dirt gets in the food? The dirt is not the point. It is the tradition of devotion that is the point. Jesus isn't religious enough. He isn't following the spiritual logic, which is pretty clear if you are so inclined: Doesn't God want us to honor Him in everything we do? Surely. Didn't God in the Torah command the priests to wash their hands before serving Him? Yes. Shouldn't every faithful follower of God have the same devotion as a priest? Of course. Isn't every meal sacred to God? Yes. Then, all meals should be an occasion for us to wash our hands like the priests. And all hands that aren't holy, well then they must be unholy, or defiled. Jesus' followers' hands are defiled. They put their hands in the food that Jesus eats. Therefore, Jesus is defiled and unholy and a threat to the faith and at one with the demons. Gotcha!

Given their spirit of taking offense, coupled with their style of religion, with its hundreds of detailed rules, there could be plenty of other ways to show Jesus falling short of God's presumed will. But they are going about it all wrong.

They are using the practices and devotions of the faith, all fine and beautiful tools, not as methods to grow, but as methods to attack.

Take, as another example, the devotion of the Sabbath: a day of worship and rest from toil commanded by God. The scribes and the Pharisees practiced it. And so did Jesus. What a wonderful gift! But when some of Jesus' disciples plucked corn when they were walking through a field, this was used as an occasion to cry foul. And when Jesus healed someone on a Sabbath, they called him out as illegitimate for working on the holy day of rest. And when they cast aspersions, they made a gift from God into a political weapon.

Listen to what our Lord said in response: "The Sabbath was made for people, people were not made for the Sabbath." This is an attempt to say that the day of worship and all the other laws and acts of devotion and traditions are there to help us. Not to enslave us as their masters. Nor to determine who are God's beloved and who are God's outcasts. Nor, as a way to defame others and cast them out from the holy tribe.

It's not only the scribes and the Pharisees who are up to this. It is the religious in every generation who make their faith an occasion to judge those who are different. Our faith is plagued by this temptation, like every other.

You know, one of the great things about the Internet is that it collects so much information that you can find out what people on the Internet are thinking. At least in the main. One of the ways is using the Google search engine. In helpful fashion, the search box will automatically fill out your query, based on the aggregate of previous searches using those same words. For example, if you type, "What should" into Google, the options offered to you are "What should I read next?" and then "What should I weigh?" This is how you know what is on people's minds.

Of note to the church: When you type "Why are Christians . . ." into Google, the first thing that comes up to finish your sentence is ". . . so mean." Ouch. The sad truth is that too many people perceive Christians as those who use their virtue and values as a tool for judgment, rather than as an aid to compassion. This ready-to-be-offended orientation toward the world may be explicitly denounced by Christ, yet the reputation of Christians is already besmirched. All the more reason to be articulate about the radical agnosticism that Christ encourages when it comes to who is "good" and who is "bad." Or who is "holy" and who is "defiled."

Because the truth is, people may be crossing every *t* and dotting every *i*. Their manners and their devotional practices may be impeccable. They may be washing their hands for God at every meal, even snacks. But our view of others is never complete. We may be able to see what people are doing on the outside, but only God knows what is happening inside. This spiritual insight was a pivotal aspect of Jesus' ministry that he approached again and again.

He quotes Isaiah to say: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." He later proclaims: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean."

Also:

"For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

Your hands may be clean, but, for Jesus, it matters more that your heart be clean. And he's not talking about clear arteries. He's talking about the heart as a symbol of our unseen desires. Jesus cares most about where our heart truly is. And his complaints concern those truly defiling actions that spring forth from a heart whose desires are all out of whack. Fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All of these actions come from desiring things, people, and powers that don't belong to us, and the willingness to lie or hurt another to get those things.

Now to be safe, you could go about making many rules about how to avoid these follies. What not to do. What lines not to cross. You could be quite detailed. The book would never end, given the complexity of our world.

But no list of strictures could replace the value of setting one's heart in the right direction away from the misplaced desires. A holy life springs forth from a holy heart, in ways that no rulebook could perfectly predict.

And so it is episodes like today's Gospel that explain why we focus so much on the heart as Christians. We do not wash our hands and feet every time we come to our holy sites to worship God. It would be a fine thing, but it might distract us from the supremely Christian insight of pursuing clean hearts rather than clean hands.

Rather than have a bath in the narthex to wash ourselves, we have enshrined a different kind of cleansing ritual at the start of every Sunday morning service. The Collect for Purity. Not ritual purity of the body, but spiritual purity of the heart's desire. *Almighty God, to You all hearts are open, all desires known, and from You no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love You, and worthily magnify Your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

A fine prayer. A fine way to put first things first, to prepare our hearts for our common worship that is actually spiritual heart surgery. This is why we need all the prayer we can muster. For it is true prayer and true worship that work at the delicate interior realm of the heart to truly renew our lives and therefore renew the life of the world.

And so, at its worst, our faith is an occasion for supremacy, to take offense at all those who are not doing the godly things that we are doing. Instead, may our faith be a driving force in our compassion for those who suffer, in our mercy for those who have wronged us, in our humility before others, and in our regular, prayerful cleansing of our heart's desires.

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