

“More Than Washing Hands”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
James 1:19-25; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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Beginning today and into September, we will be sojourning with the Letter of James. Its five chapters include close to one hundred imperatives for faithful living. James knew how the faithful should act. The letter is addressed to the “twelve tribes of the dispersion,” those believers who are living far from the central church at Jerusalem, and within cultures that will challenge their faith.

Jesus is only mentioned twice in the letter of James. That may be one reason Martin Luther called the letter of James an epistle of “straw,” yet Luther’s concern was more likely related to James’ focus on works, fearing it could be read as compromising his primary thesis of salvation by faith alone. By contrast, today we often turn to James to reinforce the connection between faith and works; as we will read next week, “faith without works is dead faith.” We may cheer James for his warnings to the wealthy and privileged, though we make sure we do not fall under James’ definitions of either.

In the verses just prior to our reading, which we used as our Call to Worship, James writes of the God of Lights, which harkens to a Greek understanding of the Source of Life beaming down life and light on people. In such a picture, the people are on a ladder, with the light coming from above; thus, those near the top of the ladder receive the most light, the most blessing from the divine. So, the Greek mind would be very much in tune with James when he writes, “*Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the God of lights,...*”

Yet, the phrase James then attaches is meant to teach how the Christian community is set apart from the hierarchical Greek culture of blessing. James adds, “*with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*” Put together, we read, “*Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the God of lights,...*” but those at the bottom of the ladder are not in the shadows, but are accorded the same amount of light from God. Equality underlies much of James.

Roz will now lead in our responsive reading of our epistle lesson in the first chapter of James, as printed in the bulletin. (James 1:19-25, Message and NRSV)

Post this at all the intersections, dear friends:

Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear.

God’s righteousness doesn’t grow from human anger. So throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage.

In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape us with the Word, making a salvation-garden of our life.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

Those who hear and don’t act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.

But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life!—even out of the corner of the eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action.

They will be blessed in their doing.

In our Gospel lesson, a group of religious leaders confront Jesus over the issue of what parents have taught children for centuries: wash your hands before eating. Or at least that seems to be the issue. Jesus will be asked why his disciples do not follow the traditions of the elders, and instead eat with what are called “defiled” hands. In fact, the word defiled is better thought of as “common”, in contrast to “sanctified,” which is what the Pharisees observed in handling the food of ritual sacrifice.

Recalling the Hebrew prophets’ injunctions against putting ritual above faithfulness, Jesus will quote Isaiah as he turns the confrontation into a teaching moment to define what is truly defiling.

Let us hear our Gospel lesson in Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23:

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶Jesus said to them, “Isaiah

prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ ⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴Then Jesus called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” ²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

In Pittsburgh, they were tucked away on the third floor of the church manse. In Albany, they lined the walls of our garage. In Ayer, they are on shelves in both basement and garage. I’m talking about boxes – lots of boxes – some of which have made multiple moves, but there is a change. For the most part, the children’s boxes are now with the children, but they have been replaced by memory boxes of our parents and a close aunt. Some day these will be sorted. Some day. Maybe.

Only the most fastidious have no boxes waiting to be sorted, or nooks in their homes not begging to be organized, and may not even have one of those drawers where all the miscellaneous stuff is tossed that could not be classified for another drawer, and they may not even have piles of files on a desk or papers in a box that need to be shredded or systematized. I find the challenge is not just finding time to do the sorting, but figuring out how to sort it. We have miscellaneous drawers for things don’t fit neatly into other categories.

I find in our Scriptures this morning a sorting of sorts, challenges we face as we make our life journey and seek to be faithful along the path. James seems to paint such challenges in black and white, between the way of faith and the lure of culture; yet, while some may long for a faith with clear definitions and laws, many find more than a bit of miscellaneous in life and faith decisions. In fact, I find those of other faiths or even those of no identified faith, can serve as welcome correctives when we proclaim faithfulness with words or legalisms, but do not follow through with actions.

So, sorting is not just for our life's treasures, or those boxes we save because, "I might need this someday." We also sort through faith stuff, but the good news is we do so within the care of a God who seeks to be in relationship with us, and cares for us so deeply as to both delight and grieve with us as we open the boxes of our lives.

In terms of washing hands before eating, in Jesus' day as today, the reason for doing so was to promote health. Jesus would not deny that, but the elaborate rituals had turned even hand washing a determination of one's religious status. Jesus teaches one cannot determine defilement by looking at another's hands. The source of evil intentions is found in the heart. He tells the crowd it is what comes out of a person that defiles, and then offers a laundry list of sin: *fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly*. My guess is none of us have committed all those sins. My guess is also all of us have committed at least one or two or three. Jesus' list is similar to Paul's works of the flesh in Galatians, though Jesus includes two Paul does not: pride and avarice, which can be thought of as arrogance and greed. Jesus has cast a wide net.

In speaking to the crowd, in the presence of the Pharisees, I hear Jesus speaking of how tempting it is for us to set up rituals and rules, expectations and needs, as imperatives for others to follow. As with the Pharisees, we sometimes believe we have defilement defined. Yet, often we, like the Pharisees, only deal with the surface.

One might think of it as the Pharisees noting only whether the outside of a storage box is tidy. Jesus is suggesting our lives are more like those translucent plastic storage totes where God can see what we hope to keep hidden, stored out of sight, tucked away in a mess, while we keep the outside looking clean.

Jesus encourages each to sort through her or his heart, to ensure evil actions do not sprout. He seems to suggest God cares less about washed hands, and is more pleased by someone who recognizes and throws away the dirt of arrogance and greed.

Similar admonitions will be heard as we journey through the letter of James. Unlike the letters of Paul, James was not writing to a single church, or even in response to a specific conflict, but is reaching out to those who are seeking to be faithfully live within the dominant Greek and Roman culture, though the letter is not a diatribe against that culture. James will actually blend images, as I mentioned when he uses the term God of Lights, which people would link with that Greek ladder image of the Source of Life beaming down life and light on people, with again James being clear no one is meant to be in the shadows and apart from God's light.

James' injunctions on being doers of the word and not just hearers extends this image of light. In the Greek culture, there was a cycle of those blessed by the light returning the fruits of one's blessings to the source. Certainly, we think the same when we make the offerings of our money and time, and within Jewish tradition there was the expectation the first fruits, the first born animal, the best, was presented to God.

What James does with the phrase “doers of the word,” is to extend the offerings of gratitude not just upward to God, but outward and downward. James is well aware even believers can buy into a hierarchy on the ladder of life, and there are people struggling in the shadows on the lower rungs. Countering any notion this situation is divinely ordained by the God of Lights, James believes those near the top of the ladder are to extend the source of life and light, of goodness and truth, to those on the bottom rungs of the ladder. James’ call to the church is decidedly in favor of those so easily forgotten, and he continues the prophetic tradition of defining faithfulness as caring for orphans and widows, the hungry and the sojourner in one’s midst.

This morning, I thought we not only have light shining down as imaged by James, but what we used to call a sun shower, when the rain fell as the sun shone, often soothing and refreshing in the summer heat. The waters of baptism are a mark of God’s grace. Baptism is more than a ritual for both parent and congregation. The sprinkling of water, whether on an adult believer, or a child whose parents are accepting the faith vows on that child’s behalf, marks the claim of God on our lives. With infants and children, we believe God welcomes us even before we can voice the name of God.

Baptism is one of two sacraments for Presbyterians, noting how Jesus told his disciples to both go into the world and baptize in his name, and remember him in the breaking of bread. The sacred act of baptism moves beyond ritual when all remember the waters of baptism that are sprinkled today mark a commitment for years to come to teach faith, nurture love, in word and in deed.

At some point, we might take care of sorting through the stuff in the boxes in our basement and garage. My guess is we will have to wash our hands of the accumulated dust as we do so. Yet, today’s Scriptures remind us, there is more stuff in our lives to sort than what we have stored away in boxes. So, as we move into our Fall routines, we are encouraged to sort through the stuff of our days:

- How am I doing as a source of God’s light? James reminds us what sets people of faith apart is our not believing we are set above. As doers of the word, we understand we are called to extend God’s light and life and blessing to all on the ladder of life.
- How am I doing in sorting through the evil intentions or thoughts stored in my heart? Jesus teaches attitudes of arrogance, envy and pride can mute our ability to be reflections of God’s goodness and love. Seeking to box them up, hide them away, or even deny them, makes things worse. The good news is when we clear them out, there is a freedom – freedom that feels a bit like washing one’s hands after finishing a messy job.