

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In light of today's Gospel, since Jesus is therein accused of allowing his disciples to eat with unwashed hands, consider these facts about handwashing from the website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a federal government agency:

- It is estimated that washing hands with soap and water could reduce diarrheal disease-associated deaths by up to 50%.
- Researchers in London estimate that if everyone routinely washed their hands, a million deaths a year could be prevented.
- A large percentage of foodborne disease outbreaks are spread by contaminated hands. Appropriate hand washing practices can reduce the risk of foodborne illness and other infections.
- Handwashing can reduce the risk of respiratory infections by 16%.
- The use of an alcohol gel hand sanitizer in the classroom provided an overall reduction in absenteeism due to infection by 19.8% among 16 elementary schools and 6,000 students.

But Jesus is saying, "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (Mark 7:15).

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come. Of course, handwashing is a good thing, but Jesus really isn't talking about basic hygiene. He's talking about human-made rituals that have come down from generation to generation, and have lost whatever meaning they might have had.

He is saying, to an audience of very ritual-oriented religious people, that eating without going through a tremendously complex, almost obsessive-compulsive hand-washing and utensil-washing ritual – a ritual that really has nothing whatsoever to do with actual cleanliness – will not "defile" you.

Now, this hits us today just as hard as it did those Pharisees back then, especially the first half of this statement: "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile" (Mark 7:15).

How often have we heard it said: So-and-so makes me so angry! How often have we said that ourselves?

There once was a student who made the mistake of telling a philosophy professor that Immanuel Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" was "boring." The philosophy professor looked at him and said, "The material is not boring, my friend. If the material were boring, Immanuel Kant would have been just as bored by it as you are. And he was not. If the material were boring, I would be just as bored by it as you are. And I am not. I find this material profoundly interesting. No, my friend.

Boredom is something you bring to the material with you. The material does not make you bored. You come to the material with a prior assumption that it will be boring. Your boredom comes from inside you. It is yours, not Kant's."

It's true: nothing outside of you "makes" you angry. So-and-so doesn't "make" you angry. So-and-so is just being who he is. So-and-so is just saying what she thinks. Your anger is yours.

Something in your past, some behavior you've learned, some human-made opinion or doctrine or rule that you learned somewhere along your life's journey has told you that you are justified to respond with anger to that particular attitude, opinion, statement or personality type.

And you've been perhaps blindly doing that for so long that you think it's just natural. But it's not. That anger is yours. It comes from inside you, somewhere, somehow. Nobody, nothing, gives it to you. It's yours, and you can assert control over it – if you are willing to do the hard spiritual, prayerful work it requires.

When you find yourself saying, "This is so boring!" – stop. Stop and look at that. This may be especially helpful to those of you of the more youthful persuasion as school is now underway once again.

You find yourself saying that this stuff is so-o-o-o boring, so useless, but – stop and look at that!

From where is this "boring" coming? Whose is it? Where, exactly, is this "boring"? Is it in the book? Or is it in me? Who says this has to be "boring"?

All of this is hard to do, of course, but it's really hard to do when you're angry! But try to disengage, pull back, and look at that anger. From where is it coming? Whose is it? Who says you "have to" be angry at this particular time, in this particular place?

What is this that has so much control over your life that it can actually make you angry, without any apparent choice on your part? Jesus said, "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile" (Mark 7:15). This applies now, today, just as much as it did back then. And it's just as hard to hear now as it was back then.

Who or what is it that we're allowing to have such control over our lives? Having "conditioned responses," certain patterns of behavioral reaction, can be advantageous in some situations, but often not in others. And, yes, we can too quickly and too often respond as the past has conditioned us: I'm bored! I'm angry!

Why don't we just put it down and walk away from it? Because we can't, of course. Some people say that God has put us on this earth to suffer. Really? The Bible doesn't say any such thing. What some of the people in the Bible have to go through – Job comes to mind – might make it seem like something like that, but ... no. God did not place us on this earth for that.

Suffering is just part of life; it is not some implacable, immovable, biblically-mandated, God-intended imperative. Neither is anger. Neither is boredom.

There is nothing, Jesus is telling us today, outside of us that makes us do or feel any such thing. It starts from in here, inside the human heart, inside our own reactions, inside our own conditioning, inside our own learned responses to things.

Nothing outside of you defiles you; the defilement comes, nine times out of ten, from how you react to what's outside.

Try this Jesus-given understanding on, next time you are confronted with anger or boredom, or whatever response you might have that is neither personally helpful, or God-pleasing.

You may actually find yourself managing your emotions in a far better way. You may actually find yourself exhibiting and modeling Christ-like responses and behavior! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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