

## “The Truth the Light Reveals”

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Based upon Isaiah 29:13-21; Mark 7:1-23

Have you heard of a product called *Glo Germ*?<sup>1</sup> As we head into the fall cold season, I suspect that it’s something that we all would probably benefit from using at least once. In much the same way that those horrible-tasting pink pills dentists give out reveal to children how well or how poorly they brush their teeth, *Glo Germ* is an oil that enables those who use it to see how well or how poorly they wash their hands. You wash your hands as you normally would with the oil instead of soap, shine a UV “black light” on them, and then, voila! You can see all the bacteria that you missed around your nails and everywhere else on your hands. **[Image of glowing hands shown.]** Yuck! It’s a useful exercise to do this, especially for school age children, because it really brings home far more effectively than bathroom signs or parental warnings, the importance of hand-washing for good health.

Well, when you first hear the gospel lesson we just heard from *Mark*, it sounds as if the Pharisees who challenged Jesus were the human equivalent of 1<sup>st</sup>-century *Glo Germ*. A bunch of them had come up from Jerusalem to hear and see Jesus in Galilee. But as they spent time with him and his disciples, they couldn’t help noticing that the disciples didn’t wash their hands before they ate. Alarmed by this discovery, and unable or unwilling to smile politely and ignore the situation, the Pharisees felt compelled to point out the disciples’ lapse in judgement, using the old hide-an-insult-and-accusation-in-a-question technique. “Hey Jesus,” they said. “Why is it that your disciples do not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands? You know, just askin’.”

Given their snarky, judgmental tone, it is not hard to understand why their question prompted Jesus to launch into a whole angry speech. But it can still be hard for us, 21<sup>st</sup>-century germaphobes, to understand why he felt the Pharisees’ concern was inappropriate. We know that good hygiene is important. We also know that people ate with their hands back then, so having clean hands was even more important then, than now. Were the Pharisees wrong to have been upset by what the disciples were doing?

The answer is yes, but not because hand-washing is unnecessary. The Pharisees were wrong because they were judging the disciples not for their lack of hygiene, but lack of faith. This text isn’t really about hand-washing; it’s about holiness and hypocrisy, and what happens to community when rules are promoted over relationships. But in order to see that, figuratively speaking, we must shine a “black light” on the text instead of the disciples’ hands, because there is so much in it that is hidden to the eye. There are at least two lessons for two different audiences within it, conveyed through theologically-illuminating word-play which, unfortunately, has been lost in English translation.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.glogerm.com/handwashing.html>.

If we start by shining the light on the hand-washing custom which seems to have been the source of tension, we discover that in Jesus' day, many, but not all faithful Jews washed their hands before eating, not just to make themselves physically clean, but also to make themselves ritually pure. It was a tradition that had grown out of laws in the Holiness Codes of *Leviticus*, although they originally applied to only priests and religious leaders. The purpose of the hand-washing tradition was two-fold. First, the ritual was supposed to sanctify the Jews' hands, in much the same way the shoe-tying ritual I talked about last week was meant to sanctify their shoes. When the Jews washed the profane off their hands symbolically before they ate, they reoriented themselves toward God and made themselves more fit to receive the food as a blessing of God. Second, the hand-washing ritual was designed to set the worshipers of Yahweh apart from the Gentiles. In the same way that we recognize the Amish and many Muslims by their clothing, the Jews in Jesus' day were recognizable in part because they went through this ritual of ceremonially washing their hands before they ate. It was what scholars call an "identity marker" for them to the world.

When the Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples, therefore, they were accusing the disciples of being unholy and profane, and Jesus of being a bad rabbi. He was holding himself out to be an expert on God's law, yet those who followed him were not even observing the easiest and most basic traditions and rituals that good Jews observed. They were throwing away their identity markers; additionally, the disciples were doing this in a mixed company, a fact which truly incensed the Pharisees. At Jesus' direction, the disciples were eating with Gentiles, (which was also against law and tradition), and not even taking the time to make it clear as they did that they were righteous Jews not pagans. In the Greek, this "crime" is more obvious because the text says that the disciples "were breaking *bread*," not with dirty or sinful or profane hands, but with "*common*" hands.

Both the words "bread" and "common" are critical to understanding what's going on in this text.<sup>1</sup> I don't know why the NRSV opted not to include them. In the chapter right before this story, Jesus equipped the disciples to feed 5,000 plus people with bread and fish, and in the story right after this, Jesus has a discussion with a non-Jew, a Syro-Phoenician woman, about bread crumbs, which makes it clear that the good news of the Gospel would not be reserved for the Jews alone. Bread is a symbol of radical boundary-breaking in *Mark*. It is a symbol of Christ and his inclusiveness. So when the Pharisees arrived, what they saw was the disciples giving bread to Gentiles, sharing a meal with them without distinguishing themselves or setting themselves apart from them in any way. They saw a community of followers of Christ, not a bunch of good Jews segregated from a bunch of unrighteous Gentiles. This horrified them.

This issue of Jews and Gentiles sharing a meal in common was very important to Mark as well as the Pharisees Jesus' originally addressed, but for different reasons. Mark was a Gentile Christian writing decades later during a time when the Jewish and Gentile Christians were still struggling to figure out how to be a Christian community together. They wondered which if any

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<sup>1</sup> Blount, Brian K., and Charles, Gary W., *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 116-43.

Jewish laws still applied. Did any of the Holiness Code? Were people allowed to eat together? By Mark's day, the hand-washing ritual was not as much a source of tension as the Jewish dietary laws and traditions, however. That is why, when Mark recorded Jesus saying, "Nothing outside a person by going in defiles the person," Mark couldn't resist adding a triumphant editorial parenthetical: "Thus he declared all foods clean!" Jesus' original dialogue with the Pharisees wasn't about dietary laws. But Mark heard in his response to their cleanliness query a proclamation that his community needed to hear nevertheless. He wanted his audience to know that the Holiness Code no longer applied to them as followers of Christ. So, as he told Jesus' story, he also interpreted it for his audience, incorporating two lessons in one text, both proclaiming a similar message. As far as Christ was concerned, holiness came from following him, not from keeping Jewish traditions.

Yet it wasn't even Jewish tradition which truly bothered Jesus. He observed many traditions as a faithful Jew himself. What really bothered him was that the Pharisees who accused him and his disciples of being unholy, were using human traditions and rules originally created to promote holiness, in an unholy way. In other words, they were being spiritual hypocrites focusing on human tradition while violating God's Commandments. Again, this is clearer in the Greek than the English. The word "common" which is typically translated "impure or defiled" because of the context, is *koinos*, from which we get the word *koinonia*, or community fellowship, a word still used in churches today. By condemning the disciples for being *koinos*, common, with the Gentiles, the Pharisees were attempting to destroy the unique *koinonia* that Jesus had created through the sharing of bread and himself. The Pharisees were doing this in the name of the "tradition of the elders." The Greek word for this oral tradition is *paradosis*, which conveys "something handed down through generations." But Mark uses the cognate verb of this term, *paradidomi*, "to hand over," as a synonym for betrayal throughout the rest of his gospel. He uses it to describe how John the Baptist, and Jesus, and in Mark's day, certain disciples, were "handed over" to the authorities to be persecuted or killed.<sup>2</sup> Put these clues together and the message is clear. It is a betrayal of God to use human rules and traditions in such a way that they destroy the *koinonia* Jesus came to create, the kingdom of God on earth.

These days it is impossible to hear the words "betrayal" and "religious authorities" together and not think of the current scandal which is rocking the Roman Catholic Church. Hundreds, maybe thousands of innocent disciples of Christ were betrayed by their church, not just by the fact that men representing God committed heinous acts of evil against them, but also by the institutional church, which chose to protect those men instead of protecting and defending their victims. This violates the Gospel and everything it calls the Church to be. The Church is supposed to be a safe space, a loving and honest community, not a place of lies and harm. So the fact that people ordained to serve God put the traditions of men, the rules and hierarchy of the institution, over Christ's charge to share God's love and build *koinonia*, all the while preaching as if they were representatives of God's will and way, is sickening.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

But the take away from these revelations must not be that we are now justified in feeling holier-than-they because we are not Roman Catholics. The Catholic church is not the only church which has been revealed to condone or ignore abuse over the years. Churches are made up of human beings, all of whom are sinners. No, the Roman Catholic Church's current crimes are just the latest painful example of what Jesus was trying to warn the Pharisees against. It's not what is outside us that defiles us or makes us pure. What's on our hands or on our plates or on our backs as clothing doesn't separate us and others from God's ways of righteousness; what's in our hearts does. We betray Christ when we use religion to hold power over others. We betray Christ when we protect human traditions more than God's ways. We betray Christ when we use rules to destroy God's koinonia, instead of recognizing that the very reason for having rules is to enable loving koinonia to thrive between fellow human beings and with God.

If you think about this for long, then it becomes clear that in the same way that Mark saw a second lesson in Jesus' teachings for his context, there is a second lesson for us in Jesus' teachings that extends far beyond the beliefs and practices of the institutional Church. This text is not just a warning against ecclesiastical hypocrisy, it is a warning against using rules and laws seemingly to take the moral high ground, all the while doing immoral or unloving things that destroy community. One non-church context I keep hearing about lately is that of homeowners' associations (HOAs). The purpose of an HOA is to create a neighborhood that is a blessing for all who live there, a peaceful, clean, and safe community where different kinds of people can live happily together. But sometimes those in charge of HOAs forget this. I have a friend whose HOA president is such a rule-monger that because of her, people are moving out of the neighborhood, instead of into it. She can cite the bylaws of the neighborhood chapter and verse, but cannot offer an ounce of the gracious understanding which is necessary to negotiate the types of compromises necessary to hold a diverse neighborhood together.

Another HOA, this time one in Annapolis which was written about in *The Capital* last week, makes hers seem reasonable by comparison, however.<sup>3</sup> Those in charge of the Park Place Condominiums are now requiring all residents with dogs to provide DNA samples of their dogs, so that if the management finds dog poop on the grounds, they can have the poop analyzed and catch the perpetrators. The management has set aside a budget of \$2,500 specifically for DNA analysis to rid the area of both the waste, and presumably the offenders. They see this as a necessity to ensure that residents will not allow their dogs to defile the grounds. It makes me wonder, just how much poop did it take to prompt the management to take these extreme steps? I mean were all the sidewalks covered? Are we talking about a true health crisis from huge swaths of territory buried in dog waste? Or more likely, was this policy the dream child of a few hard-hearted individuals who would rather police the behavior of others, than be loving and gracious neighbors themselves?

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<sup>3</sup> Gaudiano, Nicole, "Doggie don't: Annapolis condo turns to DNA testing to police doggie doo," in THE CAPITAL GAZETTE, Aug. 23, 2018, retrieved Aug. 28, 2018 from [www.capitalgazette.com/news/annapolis/ac-cn-park-place-dog-poop-0822-story.html](http://www.capitalgazette.com/news/annapolis/ac-cn-park-place-dog-poop-0822-story.html).

Obviously, the damage they are doing to the koinonia of the condo community in no way compares to the damage that was done and has been done by corrupt clergy and toxic churches. I don't mean to trivialize that. I only mean to point out that we mustn't limit the lessons in this text to the Church context because we are called to live out God's Commandments all the time everywhere. We are called through Christ to build up community, by sharing bread, caring for each other, and recognizing amidst our diversity, our common lot. Holiness comes from following Christ's example of humility, compassion, love, and grace, not from being holier-than-thou rule-mongers. Therefore, if we want a less-defiled world in and outside the Church, we must shine the black light not on others, but on our own hearts. Only when we can get the gunk out of them will the full koinonia of God's kingdom be realized.

In the Greek, the word hypocrisy was originally used to describe acting. A hypocrite was someone who play-acted that he was someone else. By using that term to describe the Pharisees, Jesus made it clear to them that he knew they were "putting on" holiness not truly practicing it. You cannot fool God by play-acting faithfulness; nor can you create true community by play-acting neighborliness. As we break bread together today, may we take the One that the bread symbolizes into our hearts, so that both in and outside these walls, we will be fortified in faith, and ready to nurture the true koinonia only God's love in Christ can create. Amen.