

“Unhealthy Conditions”

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Based upon Psalm 51:1-2, 6-12; Matt. 15:1-20

In 2010, French film maker Thomas Balmès made a charming and fascinating documentary called *Babies*.¹ The film, which had no scripted dialogue, tracked the lives of four babies for the first year of their lives. One was born in Tokyo, one in Mongolia, one in Namibia, and the other in San Francisco. The film showed without judgment the rites of passage the children all went through that first year, depicting everything from swaddling and screaming to eating, playing, and walking. One of my favorite parts of the documentary shows the differences in the families’ tolerance for dirt. While the Namibian mother cleans up the messes her un-diapered child makes on her leg using an old corn cob she has lying around, without even pausing her conversation with a friend, and the Mongolian mom allows her son to crawl through cow pastures and share a bath with a goat, the San Francisco mom is constantly cleaning off her daughter and even vacuums around her as she is lying on the floor. The film prompted, among other things, a lively discussion in the press about something called the hygiene hypothesis, which argues that children are actually healthier when exposed to dirt and animals at a young age, than they are if they are sanitized and scrubbed constantly as they grow up.

Now during the pandemic, of course, cleaning has taken on a new level of urgency all around the globe, for good reason. Those who rarely washed their hands now do so religiously. Those who spend time with farm animals, as my son does in 4-H, are now cautioned frequently about avoiding zoonotic diseases— that is diseases that can pass from animals to humans; Clorox wipes are so precious and hard to find now that they have taken on almost gold-level status, and making hand sanitizer at home is a popular pandemic activity. Given all of this, I find it kind of surprising that the trolls who like to stir people up online with inflammatory lies, and those who claim “masks are a tool of Satan,” have not yet produced a tabloid headline based upon today’s gospel lesson which reads: “Jesus Christ was *Against* Hand-washing!”

It does seem odd when you first read today’s text that Jesus was so defensive when some Pharisees noted that he and his disciples weren’t washing their hands before they ate. If cleanliness is next to godliness, then you would think that Jesus would be a stickler about such things, and it’s understandable if the Pharisees were grossed out watching Jesus’ followers dig into their dinner without washing the road off their hands first. But the debate in today’s text was not really about hygiene-related cleanliness. In Jesus’ day, people did not know anything about germs, and did not typically wash their hands with soap. Although the Mesopotamians invented a kind of soap-like substance out of fat and ashes for cleaning fabric around the time of Moses, it wasn’t until thousands of years after that that people began washing their hands with soap to avoid illness. The famous Roman baths had no soap available. People would bathe in plain water, rub perfumed oil on themselves after getting out, then finish up by scraping off the excess oil along with the dirt with a metal scraper. Even in our country, the idea that we should wash

¹ *Babies*. Film directed by Thomas Balmès. (StudioCanal: May 7, 2010 (USA)).

our hands regularly to avoid catching and spreading germs didn't catch on until around the time of the Civil War.²

But the history of soap aside, the clue in this text that Jesus and the Pharisees were talking about something other than hygiene is found in their debate about the law. The Pharisees said to Jesus, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?" Technically hand washing before meals was only prescribed in the Law for priests. But the Pharisees had expanded the tradition to encompass everyone. It was one of three identity markers they emphasized to distinguish Jews from Gentiles and the holy from the unholy; circumcision and observing dietary restrictions were the other two. But Jesus didn't respond by addressing their hand-washing question. Instead he accused them of violating the Ten Commandments through the way that they manipulated Temple giving laws, in order to avoid having to care for their parents financially. In so doing, he was promoting a different kind of identity marker for holiness and faithfulness. As John Ortberg has put it, good disciples were those "with circumcised hearts and diets of love and justice."³ Although Jesus was a good Jew who did not reject the Law, in the kingdom of God he was proclaiming was at hand, the measure faithfulness would be the purity of people's hearts, not simply their compliance with external shows of spiritual cleanliness.

Have you seen any of the videos going around which use a black light to teach how to wash your hands properly? The person washes her hands in the typical quick sort of way many of us used to, and then someone shines a special black light on her hands to show all the gunge that still remains under her nails, between her fingers, and on the backs of her hands. Well, this is basically what Jesus was doing to the Pharisees and then calling upon his followers to do to themselves too. But instead of the light revealing what was left behind on their skin, Jesus' light was designed to reveal what gunge was left behind in their hearts. The Pharisees had worked out a practice where one could give one's money to the Temple to get out of having to give it to one's parents; then once the parents died, ask for the money back from the Temple. "Ew...," Jesus said. "Your hands may be squeaky clean but look at your hearts! Do you actually think that that practice is holy simply because it is technically legally compliant? Do you actually believe that that practice honors your parents or God? Don't judge me until you clean up that gunk. My disciples and I could eat twenty pounds of dirt off of our hands and still be cleaner than you guys because our hearts are filled with love and truth and justice."

Later on, using another identity-marker, diet, rather than hand washing, Jesus explained to his disciples and the crowd of his followers, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles. When the feelings in your heart that lead you to lie and cheat and murder and fool around, that is really when you are unclean in the eyes of God. Don't be so focused on your outsides that you miss the rot on the inside."

Many people seem to have forgotten this message during the pandemic— and I don't mean just the people who are going around deliberately coughing or spitting in other people's faces after they were politely told they needed to wear a mask, or defacing every sign that says Black

² See e.g. Ridner, Judith, *The Dirty History of Soap*, "THE CONVERSATION, May 12, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/the-dirty-history-of-soap-136434>.

³ Ortberg, John, "Pharisees Are Us," in THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY, Aug. 23, 2003, 20.

Lives Matter while claiming to care about all lives. I mean regular folks like us who have reached the point that we are so on edge that we can still move from posting cat video to name calling online in 20 seconds flat when prompted by the right nasty comment. I mean all the people who are walking around sanitized and masked on the outside while wishing on the inside that something bad would happen to people different from themselves, or that all the people who are different from themselves would somehow just be sent away. I mean all of us who have allowed partisan politics to bring out the absolute worst in us– the tendency to dehumanize others, the tendency to self-aggrandize, the tendency to cast ourselves as the victims, to judge and ridicule, to stew in silent rage and resentment, to shut down rather than listen, and walk away rather than help. I don't know what it was like during the Civil War, which I imagine must have been our lowest point in terms of national unity, but I wouldn't be surprised if this year or the last few years counts as our second lowest in terms of the toxicity of our communication and the disintegration of community values. Do you see the irony in this as well as the heartbreak? Jesus would. Thanks to the pandemic, we are probably the cleanest we have ever been on the outside, but our insides are gungier and more toxic than ever.

Someday the pandemic will get under control. Someday we may be able to be less vigilant with masks and distancing and hand washing. But the environment we live in will still remain toxic if we don't clean up what's poisoning our insides as well. We not only need to change our behavior, we also need to try to change the feelings inside that motivate us to commit bad behaviors like name-calling and false witness and assorted acts of selfishness whether we ever act on those feeling or not, because God is interested in the state of our souls not just how well we can mask what we are really thinking and feeling. How do we do that? According to the great psychologist Carl Jung, we begin by acknowledging that each of us has a "shadow." He believed that all people, even good people, have a shadow personality within themselves, one that they usually are oblivious to or deny. Other people can see them; they can see our tendencies to be impatient or petty or passive aggressive or whatever. But usually we do not until something or someone forces us to recognize that we have these less than ideal aspects to our personalities. Once we do, however, can work on integrating our shadow selves into our understanding of our true selves to the degree that we can acknowledge our weaknesses and strive to overcome them.

Illustrating this process through fiction, the award-winning science fiction writer Ursula LeGuinn wrote about a brilliant but arrogant young wizard in a book called *A Wizard of Earthsea*, which was part of a wonderful fantasy series, *The Earthsea Cycle*, she published decades before J.K. Rowling made wizards trendy.⁴ Ged, the wizard, was very gifted. But he was often foolhardy and prone to showing off. Eventually, his tendency to overestimate his power and skill causes him to release a kind of dark, scary creature into the world that chases him and causes harm. The series is about how he comes to realize that that darkness came from inside him, not from some outside source like the underworld. It is only when he is willing to battle those aspects of himself, that he is able to be made whole. The series ends with him being a scarred but better man and humbler wizard.

⁴ LeGuinn, Ursula K., *A Wizard of Earthsea* (New York: Batam Books, 1968).

Confronting our shadows isn't just the stuff of fantasy, however. Anne Lamott has made a career out of writing about how God has repeatedly confronted her with the worst in herself so that she can grow in faith and wholeness. In one such incident, she developed a friendship with a wonderful couple which was quite wealthy.⁵ They often invited her on trips that she otherwise could not have afforded. But over time, their generosity awoke the beast of jealousy inside her until she was convinced that they were just trying to make her feel bad or dependent by flaunting their wealth. She was convinced that they thought they were special and ended up being quite rude to them. It was only years later she was able to recognize that all the ugliness she had projected on them had come from inside her, from a place of shame and envy. She apologized to them by letter years later, but by then she had damaged their relationship beyond repair.

“O God, you desire truth in my inward being,” the psalmist wisely wrote. This is where we start our battle with the unhealthy conditions of the world as Christians, with the knowledge that God cares about what's on the inside not just what's on the outside. When we pray to God to help us clean up the sinful or shadowy aspects of ourselves, the Spirit gives us opportunities to do just that. This is both a blessing and a challenge. If you realize your shadow is impatient, then don't be surprised if God starts giving you opportunities to practice your patience. If you realize that you have a nasty judgmental streak, don't be surprised if God gives you opportunities either to get to know the very people you have previously judged, or to be blessed and helped by them. And if you don't think you have a shadow, or don't know what it's like, ask those who spend a lot of time with you. They are familiar with it even if you aren't. Listen to them, then get to work. Start by trying to clean up the emotional equivalent of the doorknobs and light switches in your heart—the fears and the pride that can be easily triggered to prompt so many bad thoughts and behaviors. Then invite the Spirit in to help you work on washing the rest with God's love and grace so that you neither have to pretend that you don't have a shadow, nor be at its mercy.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God,” the psalmist prayed. “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” During this difficult season, when we are all becoming masters of cleaning on the outside, let this be our prayer. For as Anglican priest C.F.D. Moule wisely observed, “Externals are worse than useless, unless the heart is in the right place.”⁶ If we want a healthy world, it will take more than vats of hand sanitizer to do it. With the help of the Spirit, may our identity markers during this pandemic and in the years that follow it be the graciousness of our speech, the generosity of our spirits, and the genuine love we have for all in our hearts, for our sakes and everyone else's sakes too. Amen.

⁵ Lamott, Anne, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 107-116

⁶ As quoted in Husted, Heidi, “*Matters of the Heart*,” in THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY, August 16-23, 2000.