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First Presbyterian Church of Athens, Georgia
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Texts: Psalm 51:1-3, 6-7 and Mark 7:1-23

Getting Dirty

As many of you know, I have a two year old son, named Jack. We used to keep a pretty clean kitchen floor, and live like reasonably sophisticated adults ... and then Jack was born, and we've 100% re-implemented the 5 second rule. How many people have heard of the five second rule, or one of its many variations? Someone in my first congregation in California talked to me about a five minute rule at some point ...

The idea—for anyone who hasn't heard—is that if a piece of food is dropped, you have only five seconds to pick that food up before it is contaminated by whatever nasty, dirty stuff was waiting for it on the floor.

For all the obvious reasons, most people don't apply this rule to sticky things like already chewed gum, or a scoop of ice cream, but generally speaking, if you can get all the dirt off within five seconds, this "rule" suggests, then the food is ok to eat ... if the dirt stays in contact with the food for longer than five seconds, then the food is off limits!

Now I'm sure that no one is surprised to hear that way back in 2008—when our college students were in their five second rule hay-day, the TV show "Myth Busters" busted the rule by proving that regardless of the amount of time spent on the floor, food will collect the same amount of bacteria.

And 12 years later, I bet, you can still hear people citing to the five second rule as they prepare to put that clearly dirty piece of cheese into their mouth.

I'm not sure that this is exactly the type of thing that Jesus is referring to when he says that there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile. In fact, I imagine that if Jesus were standing there, he would advise you not to eat that cheese.

Or, if our passage today is any indication, maybe he wouldn't ... maybe Jesus' position on eating dirt would be more like my dad's, who always said "a little dirt never hurt anybody," and even—and I'm not making this up—"It's good for you!"

All theories about the health benefits of eating dirt aside, what we are dealing with in this reading from Mark is a kind of strange—if familiar—scene ... Jesus and his disciples are preparing to eat a meal and the scribes and pharisees, who have come from Jerusalem to crash the party, notice something that appears to offend them. Some

of Jesus disciples are not washing their hands before they eat—they are eating with *defiled* hands, the text says.

And we might think, ok — I'm not sure I'd feel compelled to call out other people for not washing their hands, but I can at least understand the offense. Maybe the Pharisees wanted to sit down and share a meal, but then saw Peter come out of the bathroom and thought better of it ... Maybe they were passing a loaf of bread around and tearing off pieces ...

We don't get that detail in Mark's telling of this story, because the offense isn't actually about hygiene ... it's about tradition—it isn't about *biological* cleanliness, but *ritual* cleanness as defined by a particular group of people ... in this case, the Jewish religious elite.

Now, it is worth noting that there is no Biblical law requiring all Jews to wash their hands before a meal. Priests were required to, but not everyone else. The only exception to this—the only time a Jewish lay person was required by law to wash his hands before a meal is if he has been contaminated by something that was considered ritually unclean. Since uncleanness was considered contagious, it had to be removed by ritual acts such as bathing, washing ones clothes, or simply washing ones hands.

So maybe the Scribes and Pharisees have heard that Jesus and his friends were eating with gentiles and other “unclean” people ...

Or this could just be an example of some hyper religious folks, on their self-assigned authority, expanding the reach of the biblical law, in this case, to require ritual washing of *all* Jews before *all* meals. For Presbyterians, the equivalent might be something like requiring *all* members of the church to attend *all* committee meetings ...

“If we're going to be a priestly nation,” they might have argued, “then we need to all observe the priestly rituals!”

Well, Jesus isn't having it.

Without even responding to the question, Jesus goes on the offensive: “*You hypocrites! You honor God with your lips, but your hearts are way off base. You teach your own ideas as doctrine, but abandon the actual commandments of God.*”

It is an interesting accusation for Jesus to level ... Jesus, who often begins his lessons with the words, “you've heard that it was said, but I say to you” ... Jesus who is just about to declare all foods clean, in spite of a number of Biblical laws prohibiting the consumption of certain types of food.

How is *Jesus* able to call these Pharisees *hypocrites* for teaching their own ideas as law and ignoring the commandments of God, when by all observations, he has been doing the exact same thing? Have we caught Jesus in a moment of lapsed integrity here?

If the question is simply “who is teaching his own ideas as doctrine?” then Jesus is probably just as guilty as the Pharisees. Of course Mark’s community would argue—as would this one—that Jesus was *the divine revelation of God* ... that Jesus’ ideas were not *simply* the ideas of another man, but are the very mind of God.

And that is good theology, and we should lean on it...

But there is another distinction between the teachings of Jesus and those of other religious leaders of his day ... and it has more practical application for the way we, **who are not God**, live our lives in this time and this place:

When Jesus allows some of his followers to eat without washing their hands—when he ‘declares all food clean,’ as he does at the end of our text—he is practicing *radical inclusivity at the expense of religious purity*. He’s saying—quite forcefully, in this case—that purity tests—despite their popularity—are not an effective means of faithfulness.

But Hospitality; Oneness; a Wide Welcome ... these are gospel!

The pharisees in this story interpret the law in order to exclude. And don’t get me wrong: they have some legitimate arguments for doing it. God is holy—the familiar line goes—and if we are to be in holy relationship with God then we need to keep ourselves separated from any “unclean” thing which might blemish God’s holiness. The Pharisees are simply protecting God from our mess.

In Jesus, it is revealed that God doesn’t need or want to be protected from our mess. What God *wants* is to be with us ... with ALL of us: Jew AND GENTILE! Clean AND DIRTY! The Healthy AND THE SICK! The polite AND THE UNCOUTH. None is more desired by God than any other, and none is less ... and as it turns out, the only way for God to be with ALL of us is for God to get dirty!

There’s no five second rule here; the dirt in our lives does not and cannot contaminate God’s holiness, no matter how long Christ sits in it—there is nothing outside, which by going in can defile a person. If you eat cheese off the floor, like my two year old son, Jack ... God loves you and wants to be with you. If you can’t pay your electric bill ... God loves you and wants to be with you. If you haven’t seen your son or daughter in 15 years ... of if you haven’t called your dad since November of 2016, God loves you and wants to be with you. If you spent three hours yesterday sitting outside of the liquor store, God loves you and wants to be with you.

I’m not saying that God’s love or our consciousness of it magically solves all of our problems ... God isn’t a genie in a lamp.

But your problems—your struggles—your oddities—whatever they may be—will never hinder the love of God for you. My struggles will never hinder the love of God for

me. And no one else's struggles ... no matter what they are, will ever hinder the love of God for that person.

This is the message that message that we try to preach in our worship and in our welcome, week in and week out at the Presbyterian Student Center at UGA. And I'll tell you what ... I ran the numbers for a board meeting just this week, and the result of preaching such a message has been staggering. In 18 months, we've gone from 10 students, 8 of whom were Presbyterians ... to about 40 students, 22 of whom are from PC(USA) Congregations. 13 or so are from other traditions like baptist, methodist, and even a Catholic or two ... and 5 or so do not consider themselves to be religious ... An atheist or two, at least one agnostic, and maybe three who would consider their relationship with the Almighty to be 'complicated' ...

Each week they voluntarily come to share a meal and a worship service, in which they participate in the liturgy, listen to the sermons, and most—not all, but most—choose to participate in communion, which is introduced each week using these words: *"If you desire to take part in the life, death, and new life of Christ, you are welcome to do so at this table ..."*

Why do they come and participate in these Christian rituals, you might wonder? It's because they are seen for who they are, welcomed, accepted, and loved regardless of any other labels they may bring it with them ... labels which in other religious settings, have been judged impure, and grounds for exclusion.

The Jesus I find in scripture doesn't operate that way.

The only way that we *can offend* God's holiness, according to Jesus, is to work against the truth that nothing can separate any person from the love of God—to claim that some people are less beloved of God than others—that God desires the company of some, but not all of God's children.

In response to the Pharisees question about hand washing, Jesus turns the tables and insists that it is actually the effort to stay perfectly clean—to remain above the mess, which requires the labeling of another beloved child of God as unclean—it is only this sense of self-superiority that contaminates the work of Christ. It is a mean spirit... It is seeing a person as no more than an object to be judged, taken advantage of, or thrown away.

The only way our religion will be *clean* ... is if it compels us to get dirty—to get our hands and feet and hearts into the crack and crevices of our communities, and like Jesus did, to reveal precisely in these "unclean" places the radically inclusive love of God. We all may be covered in dirt at the end of the day, but we'll be in good company; for in Christ, God got into our mess and got dirty that all might be made truly clean. May we, in faith, go and do likewise. Amem.