

SERMON

CLEAN HANDS, CLEAN HEARTS

Preaching text: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15,21-23

Isn't it funny how routine-oriented we can become? We are planning for our Rally Day Sunday. This year's Rally Day will be better than last year's since we weren't together last year due to being closed because of Covid. But we're still not back to normal. One thing that is the same is we will have one worship service at 10:00. But when I think of Rally Day, I think of barbeque. Because of Covid we cannot safely offer what we normally do. We can't have a barbeque this year. Every Rally Day I have been here for has had a barbeque. I have come to expect barbeque on Rally Day so that will be an adjustment.

We do the same thing in church with other things too. We quickly learn to count on a certain predictability of activities, and we are very hesitant to see them changed. If we are not careful, some of these expectations become full-fledged traditions. They take on a significance far greater than simply being a convenient routine. Some things become almost holy and unchangeable. They become "sacred cows." And when you mess with a sacred cow, people become very upset.

Every church has traditions that become sacred cows. In the church I served on my internship the color of the carpet had become a sacred cow. We had always had red carpet, but now the property committee was going to change it to green. Some people just weren't sure they could worship Jesus on a green carpet, God forbid. Does that sound familiar? 19 years ago, we made that same decision in the first month! I'm so glad the carpet here wasn't a sacred cow.

There is a church in Kentucky called Left Foot Baptist Church. It was a church formed when a church split. There had been a fight that broke the church up.

There are some churches that elevate foot washing to sacramental status. This was the case of a Baptist church before it broke up. The discussion came up one day about what foot should be washed first during the ritual. The church was

divided. Some said the right foot. Some said the left. The debate got so heated and divisive that the people who felt the left foot should be washed first split off and started a new congregation ... Left Foot Baptist Church. True story!

There was a book put out years ago called, "Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers". And that is right. Churches that grow find a way to eat those sacred cows.

Now, not all traditions are bad. Some are important. For 2,000 years the Church has observed the traditions of Baptism and Holy Communion. Both are the very best kind of tradition.

In our gospel, Jesus speaks about the kind of tradition that is harmful. He points out that there is a kind of tradition that is wrong.

One day the Pharisees and scribes were upset with some of Jesus' disciples because they were not properly observing the traditions at mealtime. The Pharisees had noticed that the disciples were not performing the ceremonial washing of their hands before they ate.

You see, before the Jews would eat, they poured water over their hands with the fingers pointed upward. This water was kept in special vats and guarded to be free from any impurities. The Jews washed their hands and then poured water again over their hands from the wrists this time holding their fingers downward. It was thought that by doing this, they would purify their hands from any ceremonial uncleanness. It had nothing to do with hygiene. It was just a ceremonial washing, one that had become a very important tradition.

Jesus condemns that kind of tradition by saying, "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the traditions of men."

Jesus saw through their dead tradition. He saw that they were more important with how things looked on the outside than with what really counted. Their worship was vain because they had elevated it to doctrine.

Jesus cuts through their superficiality to stress that what is on the inside is more important than what we try to project. Jesus was more concerned with their heart condition than their hand condition.

God is more concerned with who we are on the inside rather than the outside ceremonies we observe. You can pray standing up or you can pray sitting down ... and not really pray. You can wash your hands a thousand times and still have sin in your heart. You can worship on a red carpet your whole life and never really experience holy ground. It's not the outward form that matters; it's what lies in our hearts that counts.

Are there things you are doing that one day made sense but doesn't make sense for you to be doing anymore? God wants to do a new thing today, and we need to be open to it. What worked yesterday may not have power for today. Today is a new day with new challenges.

Paul said in Philippians 3:13, "Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the ... upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

A couple of weeks from now we will have Rally Day. We may not have a barbeque this year but it's going to be a great day! We will all be together for one worship service at 10:00. It is part of "God's Work, Our Hands" weekend. Rally Day normally marks the beginning of a new year of programming.

God wants to breathe new life into us ... but we must be ready to accept it! Let's be open to God doing a new thing in our lives! Let's be open to God doing a new thing in our church!

AMEN.