

Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23 Sept 1, 2018

Rituals. We all have them. Oh, we may call them habits, but still they are rituals. One that I have is that I when dining in a restaurant I use my hand cleaner after I am finished with the menu. After all, how often is the menu plastic cleaned? And how many people have handled it before the wait staff gave it to me? Oh, no, I must clean my hands after touching it. And I have a few other rituals, too.

In the 1997 movie "As Good As It Gets", actor Jack Nicholson plays an obsessive-compulsive author of more than sixty romance novels named Marvin Udall. He lives alone in an exclusive New York City apartment and he is a busy man. He spends several hours day writing about love and romance. He also spends quite a bit of time making sure he doesn't step on the cracks in the New York City sidewalks and that no other occupants of the sidewalk so much as brushes against him as he walks along the crowded streets.

Another of his favorite pastimes is insulting everyone with whom he comes in contact and fouling the air with his prejudices, whether they are against his gay neighbor or the Jewish patrons of his favorite restaurant who dare to sit at his favorite table. When anyone tries to have a humane conversation with him, he proves to be world's poorest listener. So absorbed is he with protecting his personal world from contamination that he checks out of conversations when they don't directly concern him and his needs.

There's one other pastime the busy Mr. Udall engages in. That is his daily hand washing ritual. He opens his medicine chest and there is row

upon row of gleaming amber bars of antiseptic soap, individually wrapped in cellophane, never before touched by human hands. During his daily hand washing ritual, he goes through several bars of soap. He swipes each bar only once across his palms before discarding it and unwrapping another in between rinsing his hands in water so hot it nearly raises a blister.

Verbal garbage that wounds others and hands clean enough to eat off of. Jesus reminds the Mr. Udall in us all that “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” In fact, the whole plot of this movie can be summed up as Mr. Udall gradually living his way into the truth of the pithy, pungent saying of Jesus that lies at the heart of this passage. “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defiles.”

Jesus often coined short saying or proverbs that shed light on specific situations. When we know who coined them, we call them aphorisms. Here Jesus’ aphorism counters the Pharisees’ criticism of his disciples for not following their pre-meal hand washing ritual. Implied is a broader criticism on their part against Jesus and his disciples for not observing their rules for what one could and could not do on the Sabbath and for associating with those they viewed as unclean.

The spirit of Pharisaic Judaism intended these external rituals to keep the inward heart focused on the heart of the Torah. The goal was to keep a people mindful of their duty to God and neighbor while immersed in the details of daily life. Jesus knew that even the best intentions can become corrupted. They can become substitutes for devotion to God while our hearts are occupied with thoughts that

promote our agendas and whittle others down to size. We can honor God with our lips while our hearts are far from God.

Clean hands by themselves are not enough. Cleanliness may be next to godliness but it makes a poor substitute. We need to have pure hearts before we can have pure and wholesome words. The pure in heart are those who are spiritually pure rather than ritually or ceremonially clean. Jesus, centuries before the advent of annual health checkups, is recommending that we all get our hearts checked!

As Jesus points out in Mark, harmful words express evil intentions that lead to harmful deeds. They come from the heart. For Jesus' listeners the heart was not a faculty separate from the mind, but the seat of emotions, intellect, will, and spiritual life. Our words come from our hearts and often, head straight for the heart of another. Words come from the heart and head to the heart. If the heart is a poisoned well, it has great potential to defile.

When I was growing up I would fight with my sisters. This happens in a lot of families. And we would hurl verbal garbage at one another. We can all recall hurtful words with which we have fouled the air around us. Looking back, we wish the childhood saying had been true "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Unfortunately this is not true.

No one can achieve purity of heart and speech without the help of God. The habits of judgmental gossip and subtle self-promotion are hard to break. The pure in heart are those who consistently, repeatedly allow God to cleanse them of these corruptions. They are those who find God's light to shine in their hearts to give the light of the knowledge of

God in the face of Jesus Christ as written by St. Paul in second Corinthians.

Try listening for healing, wholesome words this week, as well as speaking them. It's not difficult to do. Healing, wholesome words can stop gossip before it even begins.

“There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defiles.”

Most people get heart checkup and start watching what goes into their mouth. Jesus recommends that we check out our hearts and then start watching what come out of them! Amen