

**Sermon preached by Tom Haynes
at St. Elizabeth's, Culver
August 30, 2009
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B (Proper 17)**

[Song of Solomon 2:8-13](#)

[Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10](#)

[James 1:17-27](#)

[Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

We have a joke around our house about hand washing. I am one of those guys who has an awareness of where his hands have been, and I do seem to wash my hands more than the average person. If we were watching Seinfeld, someone would say “not that there is anything wrong with that” and cue the laugh track.

I feel a little validated these days. With the swine flu excitement and all the procedures from the Center for Disease Control about washing hands, it turns out that I am in a lower risk category for H1N1 than most people. My wife probably owes me an apology for giving me a hard time about the hand washing, but I am not pushing my luck.

They have waterless hand cleaner in a dispenser in the entrance of the Math/Science building. I have noticed some of my students can't pass without taking a squirt from the dispenser, and even I think that is over the top. I know for sure that there is more community awareness about clean hands than there used to be.

Now if you remember two weeks ago, the reading from John had a “you are what you eat” theme. I ended up talking about “soul food,” but you almost had to work to avoid the other message, and I am betting that is where a lot of sermons went. This week we are being told that the things that defile a person come from within. It seems like conflicting advice.

In my sermons so far at St. Elizabeth's, I have been preaching discipleship for the most part. I want to talk today about the practice of the faith. This hand washing Gospel reading is about people who have an OCD spiritual life. There are too many rules. The faith journey for these people is a busy place. Now I will “confess to Almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters” that I am a guy who can fall into the busy trap. I am much more comfortable saying the rosary than doing contemplative prayer. I suspect this is true for a lot of people.

Back on July 19 – my first Sunday back from Virginia, I gave you an assignment and said I would check on you to see how it had gone. Today is the day to check homework. I asked you to try to spend five quiet minutes simply aware of God's presence in your life without doing anything. I am curious to know if anyone tried this.

It is really tough for some people to do contemplative prayer of this sort, and I am one of them. This practice is the opposite of busy, and it is an important part of spiritual practice for many people.

The message of today's Gospel reading is not a message of duty and obligation and rules and busy-ness. I am not going to talk about contemplative prayer, but I do want to talk about making our spiritual lives simpler.

I am going to suggest to you that we need to worry about what comes out of us and not worry so much about complex rules. The rules and all those things we are supposed to do may very well be missing the point.

I know I don't want to be the person described by Isaiah: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Jesus identifies some horrible things that can come out of us. I don't want to be the guy who has that long list of things coming out of him that ends with "envy, slander, pride, folly." There is too much folly in my life already, but thanks anyway. I would like to reduce the pride as well while I am working on things. I won't go on here, but I am sure you are making a mental list as well.

There is nothing from outside that can defile. There is plenty from inside. What about the good things? Can they bless us if they are from the outside and we receive them? The answer is yes, and I will point to the John 6 reading where Jesus says "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever." This looks like a blessing to me, and we are blessed every day by Jesus and the people who touch our lives. Really the opposite of "defiled" is probably "purified," and the Sacraments do that too.

What about the good things that come out of us? Can we be blessed or purified by what we do? I am going to point to the reading from James in responding to this. James writes "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." This seems pretty clear. We care for the helpless and disenfranchised. We don't allow ourselves to be worldly. This is how our religion is pure and undefiled. The short answer is "yes." Our actions and the things that come out of us can keep us pure and undefiled. James says that "doers who act-they will be blessed in their doing."

Now I want to be careful that no one thinks I am preaching that we can earn redemption somehow. I am not eliminating grace here or suggesting that works will get us into heaven. I am saying though that actions are important. I am also saying we need to keep our actions centered on Jesus and not on the way we practice. I am saying we need to be reaching out to our neighbors and not reaching out for more hand soap.

This is a simple practice of the faith. It is beautiful. It does not worry about a lot of rules, and it does not involve worrying about things from outside that could defile you. We are directed first to love and take care of those who can't take care of themselves. We are blessed by doing this.

In the first century, widows and orphans had plenty of reasons for distress. Everyone understood that they were powerless and were effectively the victims of society. They relied on charity to survive, and this was a time when a family could be sold into slavery to pay off a debt.

There are those in our society who are powerless and marginalized too. I am not going to flog this idea, but you can think of people who are on the fringes of society. I want you to think of your own examples. Your example might be the odd girl out or it might be the person whose circumstances have changed because of bad investments. I'll let you make your own list. The point is that what they have is not contagious. What comes from outside does not defile after all. We are called to love these people. It is through this love that our own spiritual life is pure and undefiled.

Those of you who have been paying attention will remember that there were two parts to the verse from James. First we are called to help people in distress. Second we are told to keep ourselves from worldliness. My plan is to talk about the worldliness next Sunday, so you don't have to worry that I have just reached the halfway point.

In terms of the takeaways this morning, I have these:

What defiles us is what comes out of us and not what happens to us.

We are called to take care of those who are in distress, and we are blessed by acting on our faith in this way.

We are inclined to an OCD spiritual life. We make it complicated and busy sometimes when we should not.

My counsel is to keep it simple and keep it focused on Christ. We get distracted by the practice of our faith, and we get distracted by the worldly details. Neither one of these responses is God's will for us.

I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen