

Our Gospel story today begins with what appears to be a delegation of Pharisees and some scribes from Jerusalem getting together to investigate what Jesus is up to. However, the bone they pick is with Jesus' disciples, who, apparently, are eating with "common" hands. Unwashed hands—so they are "ritually unclean" hands.

The tradition of the time was to wash diligently before eating. Food came from the marketplace, one of those public spaces conservative Jews found so threatening that they would never eat after such contact without washing diligently.

Some of us may remember a similar scenario in the earlier days of the pandemic, when it was unknown as to whether contact with the virus was problematic with grocery items. Someone in my household was diligent with the alcohol wipes and soaking produce.

I was more skeptical about the process...but, you know, you sometimes do what you have to do!

Thing is, the issue in Jesus' time was not about catching some sort of communicable disease. It was about "social" impurity—about some folks keeping themselves separated and "untainted" from anyone they would consider to be outsiders or ritually impure. It was more of a moral issue, not a health issue. The Pharisees and scribes really believed that Jesus' disciples were being careless about the company they kept.

What had happened to many of Jesus' contemporaries during this time is that they had become captive to the traditions in place. "Why do your disciples not live according to the traditions of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" It was a legal argument for them—supported by a body of scriptural interpretations that were handed down orally alongside the

written Torah. After all, it was considered an integral part of Jewish faith and identity.

In those days, WHO one ate with, WHAT one ate, and HOW one ate was a reflection of one's status in the social hierarchy. And this sort of class distinction had become big business. There were regulators who functioned as sort of corporate middlemen for the Temple. They supervised the production, distribution, and consumption of the nation's food supplies, separating out a certain amount of every transaction as a "tithe" for the Temple. They also determined and restricted that which they considered "contaminated".

When Jesus turns the table on the concerns of the critics, he does so as a deeply religious Jew who cites the prophetic traditions of Israel in denouncing the selfish interests of the scribes and Pharisees. He asserts that their hearts are far from God, but he does not condemn all of Judaism and its leaders. Perhaps a reminder to us all not to speak or act in ways that condemn whole groups of people or religious traditions that differ from our own. Lest we be guilty of the same hardness of heart that Jesus urges us to avoid.

As we look at the complex relationship between Jesus and other Jewish leaders, there is a big question that rises to the surface. What is at the heart of our own religious faith and traditions?? Jesus uses the word "heart" three times in Chapter 7, between verses 1 through 23, and with each reference we sense the importance of the human heart for religious faith and practice. Since the heart was thought to be the center of one's will and decision-making abilities, to turn one's heart away from God or to have it filled with evil intentions was a grievous sin. Other passages in the Gospel of Mark also remind us that hardness of

heart is among the most damning of spiritual conditions, revealing a lack of compassion toward others. Christ urges us to examine our own hearts rather than our neighbor's dirty hands. "These people honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless; the doctrines they teach are only human precepts.' You cling to human traditions." Jesus' words are aimed at the very structure of the religion of the Pharisees, how holiness and sin are defined, and how the word of God regulates the life of the people of God.

Henri Nouwen says this:

"The spiritual life has to do with the heart of existence. I find the word 'heart' a good word. I don't mean by it the seat of our feelings as opposed to the seat of our thoughts. By 'heart' I mean the centre of our being, the 'place' where we are most ourselves, where we are most human, where we are most real. In that sense the heart is the focus of the spiritual life."

Jesus is clear - it is right relationship that is most sacred. MaMuse, a singing duo that has deep roots in the folk and gospel traditions, has a song entitled "*We shall be known by the company we keep.*" It reminds us that relationship rooted in justice and dignity defies and disrupts the borders and exclusions. Linda Noonan from *Enfleshed* says: "It is not just that the relationship itself is sacred, but that it is one of the places we experience and find God - God as the connective tissue weaving and holding together all of creation."

She goes on to say that "the simple act of eating in community can be revolutionary. It was with Jesus. It is intimate. Vulnerable. It is one of the ways that cultures ritually repair damaged relationships, connect with ancestors, solidify commitment, and offer blessing. One of the simplest, most ordinary things that

Jesus did is the one thing that Jesus followers continue to do regularly in the Eucharist. Whether practiced as a formal sacrament or simply in our kitchens, fellowship halls, or picnic tables, we feed. Are fed. To companion one another and eat together - this is indeed the holy stuff of life.”

We are reminded, though, that not all have access to safe spaces of belonging and sanctuary. Sometimes there is struggle and exclusion. One only needs to think back to those middle school cafeteria days of wondering or worrying about whether there would be a place for us at the table.

MaMuse’s song continues:

We shall be known by the company we keep, by the ones who circle ‘round to tend these fires.

We shall be known by the ones who sow and reap the seeds of change alive from deep within the earth.

It is time now, it is time for us to thrive.

It is time to lead ourselves into the well.

It is time now, and what a time to be alive.

In this great turning, we shall learn to lead in love.

May we consider anew the love and workings of the human heart.

May we re-examine what kinds of ritual or practices may help us to develop a meaningful relationship with God and our neighbor.

May we continue to take risks on each other and think about who we choose to sit with and who we don’t in the big cafeteria of life.

How do our practices of Sabbath keeping, charitable giving, public worship, private prayer, service work, justice work, hospitality, and forgiveness deepen our sense of God’s presence and power and love among us? It doesn’t always have to be

complicated or complex, for it is indeed a unique process for each one of us.

However difficult or challenging Jesus' words may be for you or me, there is within them the hope of renewing or adjusting our attitudes and actions so that we may reflect God's loving intentions for all of humanity. May we continue to remember and reimagine how we feed each other in ways that build Beloved Community.

Thanks be to God!