

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

In last week's Gospel, you recall, the Pharisees complained about Jesus' disciples, that they were eating with unwashed hands. The Pharisees thought that that would make the disciples ceremonially unclean, though what they were requiring was only a "*tradition of the elders*" (Mark 7:3). Jesus corrected the Pharisees and chided them for burdening the people with new laws not given by God but made up by men. "*You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men*" (Mark 7:8).

Of course, there were things that made a Jew ceremonially unclean, like eating foods that were declared unclean (Leviticus 11). Pigs and rabbits were unclean, for example. Shellfish were unclean, shrimp and lobsters, etc. Carrion birds were unclean: eagles and hawks, etc. Certain reptiles were unclean; certain insects were unclean. "*By these [eating or touching them] you shall become unclean*" (Lev. 11:24), the Lord told the Jews through Moses.

Jesus upends that today as He continues with the people. "*There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him ....*" By this, Mark adds, Jesus "*declared all foods clean.*" Not only does eating with unwashed hands not make one ceremonially unclean, but neither does eating foods that used to be classified as unclean. You can imagine how tough that was for pious Jews to hear.

And lest you think that perhaps we're misunderstanding Jesus here, He Himself reinforces this teaching after He had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. You can hear Peter struggle with this teaching, too, but Jesus is firm with Peter. You recall in the Book of Acts, as the disciples were spreading the Good News of Jesus, that Peter had a vision as he was up on the housetop of Simon the tanner. Down came a sheet from heaven, and on it were "*all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air*" (Acts 10:12). "*Kill and eat,*" he was told, but Peter replied, "*By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.*" And don't be fooled by the word "common"—that's the same adjective that's being used here in Mark, just translated differently: in Mark it's translated as "defiled" and in Acts it's translated as "common." Here in Acts, Jesus speaks from heaven, reiterating what He taught in Mark, "*What God has made clean, do not call common*" (Acts 10:13-15). What you eat is not going to make you ceremonially unclean.

St. Paul teaches it, too: "*let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink ...*" (Col. 2:16). Because "*These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ*" (Col. 2:17). Because Jesus' coming has done away with all kinds of ceremonial laws—like the food laws. They're fulfilled in Jesus. Earlier Jesus had taught about Sabbath laws, because His disciples were plucking grain on the Sabbath. Those laws also go away in Jesus, because "*The*

*Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,*” and *“the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath”* (Mark 2:27-8). St. Paul also mentioned these laws: *“let no one pass judgment on you ... with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath”* (Col. 2:16), because these things are all about Jesus. What about *“asceticism and severity to the body”* (Col. 2:23), things like fasting? Jesus was asked about that, too, with respect to His disciples. “Why don’t they fast?” He answered, “because they have the Bridegroom with them” (Mark 2:18-9). All these things find their fulfillment in Christ, the Bridegroom.

Friends, we’ve got Christ now! The Bridegroom is here. He came; He died; He rose; He reigns. He is with us even now. So we should stop trying to hang onto shadows. We’ve got the substance, the real thing!

So, eating with unwashed hands does not make us unclean, nor does eating any kind of food. These do not enter the heart, Jesus said, but the stomach and are soon expelled. What does make man unclean, then? It’s *“the things that come out of a person.”* It’s what comes *“from within, out of the heart of man.”*

Jesus and the rest of Scripture speak of the heart as the center of man, of his will and intellect and feelings. Thus Jesus calls upon us to *“love the Lord [our] God with all [our] heart”* (Matt. 22:37), but ever since the sin of Adam that brought death to all mankind, that’s not the kind of heart we have by nature. We have hearts corrupted with sin — corrupt hearts, foolish hearts, wicked hearts, proud hearts, selfish hearts, stone hard hearts (Ps. 14:1, Prov. 21:4, Gen. 6:5, James 3:14, Eze. 36:26, etc.). And all by itself, this Old Adam in us is sufficient for condemnation.

But even worse, because of this original sin, we belch out of our hearts all sorts of wickedness. What a list: *“evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness”*! Luther calls all these and more “the fruit of this [original or chief] sin” (Smalcald Articles, III.I:2), and this is what makes us unclean. Solomon asks, *“Who can say, ‘I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin’?”* (Prov. 20:9) The answer, of course, is “no one can!” We’re all guilty of them! We’re sinners! Repent!

And while the food we eat may only go into our stomachs and not our hearts, we can’t say that about everything from the outside — things that enter in by our eyes, for example. Jesus calls our eyes *“the lamp of the body”* and says, *“if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness”* (Matt. 6:22-23). Likewise, Paul talks about *“having the eyes of your hearts enlightened ...”* (Eph. 1:18). What the eyes take in enters the heart. Eyes that take in good, enlighten the heart; eyes that take in bad, darken it. Therefore, beware of what you put into your hearts by what you read with your eyes or look at with them. Similarly, our hearts can be enflamed with ungodly

passions with ears that listen to unsound teaching that seeks to steal away our Christ. Beware of that, too, and seek out sound teachers.

Now, of course, besides our own sinful nature, we have powerful enemies that assail us: the world and the devil. We constantly do battle “*against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*” But today, Jesus is talking about the enemy that is us, to paraphrase the cartoon strip Pogo the possum, the enemy inside us. Therefore, the remedy to our woes cannot come from within. It must come from outside of us. It must come from God.

Yes, our salvation lies with God Himself, through Christ alone — “*there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). It is by grace alone — it’s a gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9). “*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses*” (Eze. 36:25), the Lord says. “*I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you*” (Eze. 36:26). Or as we prayed with David earlier: “*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! ... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me*” (Ps. 51:2, 7, 10). It’s not your doing; it’s the gift of God.

It’s not your work. It’s Jesus’ work. He has earned all of this for you, that He might also give you a pure heart in a body that at length will be raised up to see God (Matt. 5:8). God has cleansed you from all your transgressions, by the sacrifice of Him whose blood cleanses us from all our sins (1 John 1:8), and He now distributes what He earned to you — again in things that are outside of you, for not only do these things not defile you, but Jesus Christ Himself has instituted their use.

And what Christ “institutes and commands cannot be an empty thing,” Luther reminds us. “It must be a most precious thing, even though it looked like it had less value than a straw” (Large Catechism, Baptism, 8). Indeed, the Holy Spirit uses these external things that He might distribute God’s grace—like the water in Holy Baptism, like the word of grace spoken into our ears, like bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper.

Yes, baptismal waters are most precious for simple water combined with God’s command and promise become a water rich in grace. These waters take hearts and minds set on the flesh, and turn them into hearts filled with the Holy Spirit and into minds set on the Spirit. The word of the Gospel, sown into our hearts that spouts and grows and yields fruit, is precious, for salvation comes to each of us as we believe in our hearts in Jesus as Lord and Redeemer. Bread and wine are precious to us when Christ’s instituting words are added to them, for although this food is eaten with the mouth and carried to the stomach, it is different than ordinary food which is digested

and “transformed into the body which [ate] it.” This food of the Lord’s Supper is spiritual food — Christ’s own body and blood that, as Luther says, “transforms the person who eats it into what it is itself, and makes him like itself, spiritual, alive, and eternal.” And I love the illustration that Luther gives. He says, it’s “as if a wolf devoured a sheep and the sheep were so powerful a food that it transformed the wolf and turned him in to a sheep” (Luther’s Works 37:100-1).

What marvelous things God has given us for our good: Jesus, the Gospel, the Sacraments! For unlike what the Pharisees thought, our uncleanness is not from without, but from within. But our righteousness is from without, from God Himself. It is not as many Christians teach today, that we’ve got to muster something up from within ourselves to be saved, for our flesh avails nothing (John 6:63), and hearing Jesus today, we know that that ability is not in our hearts by nature. Rather our salvation is outside of us, from God alone, from the willing Sacrifice that earned the salvation of the whole world to the Word and Sacraments that deliver the fruits of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection to us, and give us new and contrite hearts in faith (Collect for Ash Wednesday).

God grant that He may lead us to realize this, so that, out of the clean hearts and right Spirit God creates in us, the joy of your salvation may erupt from us in thanks and praise, and we may show forth the love of God in Christ Jesus unto all the world.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.