

Outcomes

Reading from the Epistles: James 3:5-12

Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 15:10-20

It all started with a complaint because somebody didn't wash their hands. You know how it goes, some employee, one of those true believers always on the lookout for a violation of company policy, sees someone they already dislike break a minor rule, and they head straight to HR to file a complaint implicating not only the rule breaker but also everyone he hangs out with, and inevitably it all blows up into a big ol' brouhaha. Our chapter begins, *"Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat?'"*

You wonder if this was the typical political maneuver used by everyone from sixth graders to homeowners' association protesters to church curmudgeons to members of Congress, using one person's transgression to implicate a whole class of people. Surely, I'm not the only one whose dad regularly pulled this trick. He'd be driving down the road, and in his peripheral vision he'd spy some kid dressed in some nonconformist outfit or acting in some outlandish way, and without fail, he'd huff, "Is that what kids are doing these days?" How would I know? I've

never seen the guy before. I don't know a thing about what his crowd "does." Do the pharisees actually have evidence that all of Jesus' disciples didn't wash their hands? Probably not.

Of course, to a certain degree, though for different reasons, I have to admit that I'm sort of with the Pharisees on this one. What do you mean he didn't wash their hands before burying his fist in the m&ms!?! I mean, really, even before the pandemic, the thought of someone doing that would gross me out. You see, I have to confess to being, let's say, an aggressive hand-washer ... not obsessive, mind you ... just a tad aggressive. I don't mind a little dirt. It's that feeling of a filmy foreign substance on my hands that triggers my addiction to the foam soaps of Bath and Body Works. Don't tell Donna, but I go through them twice as fast as anyone else in the family.

Anything sticky, oily, or grainy sets up shop on my fingertips or palms ... and I'm looking for a sink. Love me some crunchy Cheetos, Nacho Cheese Doritos, caramel corn, honey-roasted peanuts, but I don't eat them very often, and certainly not when I'm driving. My tastes buds may be singing, but my fingers are filing for workman's comp, *What am I supposed to do with this?* You say I'm a germaphobe, but I'm really more of a stickyphobe.

Doctor says, *make sure you use your sunscreen*, and I'm thinking, *Sure Doc, but only if there's a sink nearby!*

Now, the Pharisees complaint wasn't about sticky fingers or even about germs. No, their beef was that a rule was broken, and so somehow Jesus, who had already flared their nostrils and twisted their *Tommy John's*, had to be responsible.

“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” The religious law and tradition mandated that the faithful carefully avoid touching anything that had been declared unclean. This would include a human corpse, the carcass of a dead animal, anyone who was ritually unclean, and objects that had been touched or used by someone who was ritually unclean. In addition, there were foods that were not to be handled or eaten because these had been declared unclean.

But here's the problem, these rules surrounding ritual purity and impurity continued to expand and multiply to the point that the rules and rituals became more important than the purposes and intentions behind them. Imagine that! People actually hyperventilating over rules, procedures,

and policies instead of focusing primarily on things like purpose, intent, meaning, and mercy.

How could that happen among intelligent people? Quite easily, actually. As the legendary Admiral Hyman Rickover famously observed, “If you are going to sin, sin against God, not the bureaucracy. God will forgive you but the bureaucracy won't.” You show up at the wrong department, forget to initial the second paragraph on the third page, arrive two-seconds after closing, miss the deadline by a day, not catch a typo in the term paper, and suddenly the best you can hope for is *I'm sorry, we can't help you. You can apply again next year.*

Of course, the church is not immune to the slow advancing creep of rules, traditions, and policies. The longer a congregation has been in existence the more laborious and clogged the guidelines and policies become. Someone gets irritated, a complaint is made, and a new amended policy magically appears. Every rule has a story behind it. Wedding policies are notorious for this — (Baptist Church in Alabama) *Caterer must have adequate staff to keep plates/cups off furniture; After the photography session, preceding the hour of the wedding, attendants shall immediately return to the Attendants*

Dressing Room ... and remain in the Attendants Dressing Room until time for the ushering and/or processional. The bride may visit her attendants there. The attendants should not gather in the Bride's Room, the groomsmen room, outside, or in the Narthex; (Presby church in FL) Bridesmaids shall never walk up or down the side aisles, only the center aisle. Oh Lord, and then comes the reception. No crumbly or messy food may be served; No red punch may be served. Each time you hear someone in church say, "Well, I never," you can count on another layer of prohibitions, and one rule that seems to have become universal if you are in a wedding, attend a wedding, have anything to do with a wedding, or even happen to be driving by a wedding, leave the glitter at home.

Inevitably, rules that are made for practical reasons in one era, evolve over time into rules that are no longer relevant but remain zealously enforced. A lot of time is spent in communities, churches, institutions, and corporations abiding policies that no one can articulate any reason as to why the rules are in place. Call them rules without a reason.

The tension between Jesus and the Pharisees was that the Pharisees' fierce embrace of rules left no room to embrace either the God in their

midst or the neighbor next door. A frustrated Jesus says, “Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.” They had lost sight of the prophets’ warnings. In Hosea 6, we read, *“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”* In Amos 5, the Lord declares, *“Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”* And Jesus, in the same speech as our text, quotes Isaiah, *“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”*

Later in this same Gospel, Jesus perfectly sums up his frustration with those punctilious pharisees, scribes, and all who prioritize rules over love. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!*

You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. What a perfect image for our tendency uphold our rules, policies, and convictions while neglecting

our neighbors; our habit of majoring in the minor and minoring in the major; obsessing over the detail and ignoring the larger picture.

Jesus said, “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

A generation ago in a seminary class, our professor brought in a consultant from one of the major news networks who advised new anchors and reporters on how to present themselves on camera, the idea here being that if she could make a reporter presentable on camera, maybe she could make a preacher presentable in a pulpit. She talked about the trending color for power ties; the best style of glasses to wear; the placement of your chin; the posture of your shoulders, the proper gestures for emphasis. Some students were eating it up, taking notes, lifting their chins, examining their spectacles. The rest of us were scrunching our faces, rolling our eyes, whispering snarky retorts. So, when she asked for a volunteer to

demonstrate the effectiveness of those insider practices, a friend sauntered up to the pulpit, leaned to the side with a smirk on his face and said,

I DO NOT LIKE THEM, SAM-I-AM.

I DO NOT LIKE GREEN EGGS AND HAM.

I WOULD NOT LIKE THEM HERE OR THERE.

I WOULD NOT LIKE THEM ANYWHERE.

Then he quietly sat down as the class, well, at least most of them, erupted in laughter. I don't think the consultant appreciated or got the joke. Yet, it was a spoof that carried an important idea. What are we doing here? The purpose is not to impress the people, meet the standard, check the box on every rule, heed the preferences of focus groups, or dress for success. The purpose is to relate the gospel, speak the truth in love, and try not to be a wrench in the gears of God's grace. You see, it is possible in life to obey all the rules, uphold every policy, mimic the magazine model and still be a jerk.

Jesus said, *“Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.”* Look at Jesus' list of heart-sourced sewage — evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false

witness, slander. Every one of them has to do with how we treat one another.

Of late, columnist David Brooks has offered a voice of reason in a culture of chaos. Rather than echoing the flood of angry rants that are threatening to drown us, he has focused considerable energy toward an understanding of things like the common good, the healthy relationship, the cultural gaps that inhibit moral formation. In a way, he's asking whether the partnership of heart **and** mind can bring healing to a broken world. In an article in this month's edition of *The Atlantic*, Brooks wrestles with the timely question of how America got mean.

Disturbing statistics concerning things like loneliness, violence, and polarization have revealed that, "We're enmeshed in some sort of emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis, and it undergirds our political dysfunction and the general crisis of our democracy." Brooks observes that, "We inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration. Our society has become one in which people feel licensed to give their selfishness free rein."

I get that. We pressure cook our kids to achieve a resume as thick as a dissertation, yet focus little on training them how to treat the people around them, assuming that they'll just pick it up along the way. And yet, as Noah Webster observed way back in 1788, "The virtues of [people] are of more consequence to society than their abilities; and for this reason, the heart should be cultivated with more assiduity than the head."

Thus, Brooks suggests that we learn most virtues the way we learn crafts, through the repetition of many small habits and practices, which means we teach each other how to treat one another and hold each other accountable as we live, as we fail, and as we try again. Without attention to moral formation, we are prone to become what scholars term, *vulnerable narcissists*. "We all know grandiose narcissists—people who revere themselves as the center of the universe. Vulnerable narcissists are the more common figures in our day—people who are also addicted to thinking about themselves, but who often feel anxious, insecure, avoidant (David Brooks, *The Atlantic Monthly*) - the training ground for hatred and violence.

Philosopher Iris Murdoch wrote that, "Nothing in life is of any value except the attempt to be virtuous." For her, moral life is not defined merely

by grand heroic action. Instead, moral life is something that goes on continually—treating people considerately in the complex situations of daily existence.

She says, “We go about our days with self-centered, self-serving eyes. We see and judge people in ways that satisfy our own ego. We diminish and stereotype and ignore, reducing other people to bit players in our own all-consuming personal drama. But we become morally better, she continues, as we learn to see others deeply, as we learn to envelop others in the kind of patient, caring regard that makes them feel seen, heard, and understood. This is the kind of attention that implicitly asks, ‘What are you going through?’ and cares about the answer.” (From David Brooks, *The Atlantic Monthly*)

It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles. Benevolent organizations like the United Way tend to talk about *outcomes*, asking potential grant recipients to demonstrate what specific outcomes will result from the infusion of a grant. Today Jesus is asking about your outcomes, specifically listing the outcomes to avoid. Later, Paul will cleanse and reverse Jesus’ litany of mouth sewage

with what he terms as the fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Hey, believe me, I'm in favor of hand-washing, but that won't do you much good if the outcome is the sewage of injustice and malevolence. What is your outcome? Doctors say that fruit is essential to good health. So, pull out the spiritual plumber, so that our outcomes no longer look like sewage, but taste like fruit, the spiritual fruit of grace revealed through Christ.

Amen.