

**Wash Your Hands, Or Your Heart?**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**February 16, 2020**

*Mark 7:1-23*

This scene didn't make any sense. There he lay in the street, bleeding -- the hit-and-run driver gone. The man clearly needed medical help immediately! Yet he kept begging them, *"Don't take me to the hospital, please!"*

Surprised, everyone asked why. Pleadingly he answered, *"Because I'm an administrator at the hospital. It would be embarrassing for my staff to see me like this. They've never seen me bleeding and dirty. They always see me clean and healthy; now I'm a mess."*

*"But the hospital is for people like you! Can't we call an ambulance?"* People in the crowd asked. *"No, please don't. I took a Pedestrian Safety Course, and the instructor was an EMT and what if she was in the ambulance and saw me, and criticized me for getting hit? I'd feel so ashamed."* *"But who cares what the instructor thinks? You need attention."* They responded.

*"But there are other reasons, too."* The man said. *"The Admissions Clerk would be upset. She always gets upset if she doesn't get all the details she needs to fill out her records. I didn't see who hit me, and I don't even know the make of the car or the license plate number. She wouldn't understand. She's a real stickler for entering perfect records. She's a week away from retirement and I don't want to put her through all that."*

He winced in pain, and continued, saying *"Worse than that, I haven't got my insurance card on me."* Incredulously, a young woman in the crowd said *"What real difference would that make?"* The man took a deep breath and said *"Well, if they didn't recognize me in this mess, they wouldn't let me in. They won't admit anyone in my shape without an insurance card. They have to be sure it isn't going to cost the institution any money. They protect the institution, it's their job, that's what I hired them to do. Just pull me over to the curb. I'll make it some way. It's my fault that I got hit."*

With this, the man tried to crawl to the gutter while everyone around him there, alone. Maybe he made it, maybe he didn't. Maybe he's still trying to stop his own bleeding.

Does that strike you as a strange, ridiculous story? Maybe not. Ask an active church-goer what they would do if on Saturday night they got in trouble with some unacceptable sin. Would you want to go to church the next morning? Or would you believe people would look at you differently if they knew, like you're strange and don't belong anymore? The people who sit next to you in the pew every Sunday might be embarrassed, and not know how to react, because they didn't know how everybody else felt about you.

So maybe we would be better off to go to the pool hall instead of to the church. At least at the pool hall we would find sympathy, real understanding. Maybe someone would say, *"This isn't the end of the world. It happened to me, and I lived through it."* Another would respond, *"I see you slipped and got caught. Well, don't let it get you down. I know a good lawyer who will help you."* Another might add, *"You really seem more like one of us than you did before. Now we know you're just like us."*

Now, the question that should bother us about this scenario is: Where should real love and understanding live -- in the pool hall, or in the church? And are we really going to be the church until every person, who has been hit and run over by a mistake they've made, can honestly say *"Take me to church. My brothers and sisters are there. They care for me. I can get well there. I'm feeling weak now, but when I hurt, the strong ones carry me. And I know they won't talk badly about me when it's all over. I'll be safe with them."*

Word of this Jesus movement had reached Jerusalem, and everyone from the chief priests to King Herod himself was troubled about it. So troubled that a delegation of Pharisees and scribes came down from Jerusalem to investigate. They had heard some disturbing things about the ways in which Jesus and his followers challenged some of their generally accepted traditions, and they wanted to know more.

As they watched the disciples and Jesus, they saw that some did not wash their hands in the prescribed, ritualized way before they ate.

Understand that this is not a problem of hygiene at all. I am sure the disciples washed their hands before they ate, I do not doubt that in the least. What seemed to bother the religious folk was that they did not do it the right way. You see, in their eyes, you could have washed your hands with finest of soaps, and scrubbed like a doctor preparing for surgery;

but if you did not do it in a certain way, you were just as unclean, ceremonially, as though you had not washed at all.

This tradition began as an attempt to understand the Law. The book of Leviticus required that certain ablutions, certain washings, be performed as a way of teaching the people how to handle sin. That was the original intent, anyway. Over time, as these requirements were applied to various situations, suggestions were made as to the proper way to do them.

Now there was nothing wrong with that, particularly. Except that these suggestions were made almost exclusively by priests, who had all the time in the world to interpret the suggestions and add to them. Eventually, there was this tremendous build up of tradition which demanded inflexible obedience and scrupulous observance of even the most minor details, so that the original purpose of the Law was all but forgotten.

In our text today, Jesus tells them that when that happens, we become hypocrites.

Too often what we claim to be and what we really are is miles apart. We call this condition "*hypocrisy*". This word comes to us from the ancient Greek language. It was used to describe actors in a play who would carry different masks in their hands as they acted. The masks were attached to sticks and could be held before the face as needed. A smiling mask suggested humor, a frowning mask suggested sadness, etc. These actors were called the "*hypocritas*". This word means "one who wears a mask".

Today, we use the word hypocrite to describe people who pretend to be one thing when they are actually something else. It can also be used to describe a community. Now I'm sure there might be some churches that are filled with hypocrites, but not here at the Monroe Congregational Church! There can't be in such a faithful, community-focused, Jesus-following church such as ours!

I have a high school friend Meredith who has become kind of mid-level famous as a mommy-lifestyle blogger. She's one of those Gen-Xers who was raised in a church; but threw out organized religion because she saw too much hypocrisy. And now she finds it hard to believe that I'm a Christian minister because of what she sees portrayed in the media.

She tells me, "*You use great words, wonderful words*" -- '*God-words*', she even calls them -- "*but you don't really mean them. The church talks about love, but you don't really love or you'd convert your campus into a homeless*

*shelter. You talk about forgiveness, but you don't really forgive when all you do is fight amongst yourselves. The church can talk all you want about acceptance, but you don't really accept, or your pews would show some diversity."*

Gosh, that stings – because I wonder if she's right.

Tradition can play a tremendous force in our lives, it's a power from the past that touches us all at one time or another. Some of us are here this morning because it is your tradition to be here, Sunday is the day you go to church. It's been that way all your life. We have sung hymns together and prayed together and collected an offering together because it is traditional to do so in a morning worship service. Many years our PF'ers even have an entire night dedicated to teaching new members about traditions they hold dear.

Our traditions can define so much about who we are. Now, is that good thing, or a bad thing?

I guess what Jesus is trying to teach them is that tradition has a way of externalizing religion, so that we are more concerned with what others see us do on the outside, than the state of our hearts on the inside. And I wonder if sometimes we lean toward being so enamored with tradition that we miss the opportunity to minister in Jesus' love. And that's just sad.

Purity and defilement are not a throwback to ancient days. They appear in all the crafty choices we make about whom we'll embrace or avoid, choices about what's good for us or what threatens our survival. For the best of religious reasons, the Pharisees and scribes also made such choices: faithful living instead of defilement, acts of purity to resist all that debases and degrades.

Jesus took this choice seriously, but then raised it to a new level, with a dangerous twist. Maybe trust in God leads right into defilement. Maybe faithful living calls for associating with the unclean. Maybe that's why the very next place Jesus went after this story was over the border, with unmerited healing for an unworthy foreigner and her diseased daughter. Maybe that's why the very next chapter finds him again among the unwashed in the desert, concerned not with proper foods or vessels but in providing an abundant feast where each is satisfied and all have a place at the table.

Maybe that's why, by the end of that very chapter, Jesus gestured where his faithful defilement would lead: to rejection for the sake of the impure, whose plight would become his own.

Out of love for God, we want to remain undefiled, to keep our distance from all that might be unclean. But Jesus died as one of the impure, the sign of a different love—a holy love poured out for the soiled and humiliated of our world, including us. That's a sign meant to open us, free us, impel us toward a more daring trust in God and one another. When we eat here, when we wash there, when we leave this place to associate with neighbors yet unknown.

God's love embraces us precisely in our impurity and defilement. And maybe that makes this the perfect word for us to hear today, something to ponder not just during the challenges of the coming year, but even over the course of our lifetime. Amen.