

Wash Your Hands

Before we go any further, I need to say up front: Wash. Your. Hands. Seriously, Jesus would tell you to wash your hands, too. This passage is not a pass on basic hygiene. And with the rampant spread of flu and viruses that refuse to go away, handwashing is the best preventative measure against spreading contagion.

So what is going on here? Since we know how germs spread, we might align ourselves with the Pharisees at first, because...yuck. But this is not a debate about the necessity of simply washing one's hands before eating. No, this is—as one colleague has said—an argument among cousins about the practice of ritual washing, about who is worshiping and following God the right way. It is important that we pay attention to the fact that this is a debate among family members, of sorts. Scholars note that when the gospel of Mark is written—decades after Jesus lived—there has been a split in the Jewish community over practice and ritual, as well as over whether Jesus is the Messiah they have been hoping for. It is too easy to point fingers at those Pharisees and shake our heads about how off-base they are.

We learned it in grade school, or maybe earlier: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” And almost as quickly as I learned it, I found it to be completely untrue. Broken bones can be mended. Words wound in a deep and complex way we cannot always see. And then there are eye rolls. It's one thing to be on the receiving end of an eye roll from a teenager who lives under your roof; it's another thing entirely to be the target of an eye roll from a peer or a partner. In his address to the recent National Prayer Breakfast, Arthur Brooks quoted research from a leading expert on marital reconciliation, Dr. John Gottman. Dr. Gottman has studied thousands of couples over the course of his career. And he has an uncanny ability of predicting when a relationship is on irredeemably shaky ground:

How can he tell? It's not from the anger that the couples express...anger doesn't predict separation or divorce. The biggest warning signs, [Gottman] explains, are indicators of contempt. These include sarcasm, sneering, hostile humor and — worst of all — eye-rolling.¹

Now I should be clear that I do not believe Gottman would say that an eye roll here and there between spouses is the death knell for a marriage. My hunch is that when the majority of communication between spouses is filled with hostility, resentment, and dismissal, the relationship is likely broken beyond repair. It is when a couple becomes mired in contempt that they have a rift that cannot easily be bridged. Because contempt writes the other off. Contempt distances us from one another. Contempt, as defined by a 19th century philosopher is “the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another.”² Brooks continues:

These little acts effectively say, ‘You are worthless’ to the one person a spouse should love more than any other. Want to see if a couple will end up in divorce court? Watch them discuss a contentious topic and see if either partner rolls his or her eyes.

Why do they do that? The answer is that it's a habit, and that habit is tearing their marriage apart. And like a couple on the rocks, in politics today, we have a contempt habit. Don't believe it? Turn on prime-time cable TV and watch how they talk. Look at Twitter — if you dare. Listen to yourself talking about a politician you don't like. We are guilty of contempt.

It's a habit, and it's tearing our society apart.³

And we in the church have played along. “It's from the inside, from the human heart, that evil thoughts come,” Jesus says. And while he lists the big ones such as murder and theft, he also includes “envy, insults, arrogance, and foolishness” on the list. We ourselves have caught the contempt contagion, the eye roll flu, even, wrapping up insults and arrogance—among other things—into one tidy toxic bundle. And all of the handwashing and hand sanitizer in the world will not rid us of it, because it has infected our hearts, Jesus might say.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/02/07/arthur-brooks-national-prayer-breakfast-speech/?arc404=true>

² As quoted by Brooks here: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/02/07/arthur-brooks-national-prayer-breakfast-speech/?arc404=true>

³ Brooks

The original intent of ritual handwashing, like any ritual is to be intentional, to shift one's attention to the practice of worship. This ritual handwashing strikes me as a moment of confession and preparation in a way. In washing hands before entering the Temple, the Pharisees have a moment to recall what it is they are about to do and who it is they are about to worship. Jesus says their rituals have become empty. Rituals become empty when they become simply for show without any connection to the practice and the posture they are intended to shape and inform. Rituals become empty when we forget the *why* while insisting on the *what*. That is what Jesus wants the community to understand. I honestly do not think he is bashing the ritual. It is their hypocrisy, their going-through-the-motions that frustrates him. He is concerned, deeply concerned about their hearts, our hearts, even.

Because we—along with Mark's original hearers, are the intended audience of these words. The gospel is written so that future generations can come to understand who Jesus is and who he calls us to be. I'm fairly certain he is not changing the Pharisees' minds here, but they are playing a role in this story, a story that does not begin in a stable, a story that hearkens back to the beginning of the human race and our love story with the Lord of all. Jesus quotes Isaiah, and reminds all of us who are listening that the people of God have been down this road before. The Pharisees would tell you and me that they want to be faithful to all God asks, and that they want the community to be faithful, too. And maybe, after hearing Jesus' words, maybe a few would confess that they have gotten sidetracked in that, that contempt has gotten the better of them, that their hearts have been infected. Maybe. But the bigger question comes back to me, to us, to the church: what comes from our hearts, what do we offer to the world while wearing the name of Jesus the Christ?

A few months back I stumbled upon an Instagram account called PreachersNSneakers. The account simply posts pictures of celebrity preachers wearing high dollar sneakers, alongside the supposed value of those sneakers, along with the occasional mention of the market value of the preacher's pricey designer clothing. It is catnip for snarky mainline preachers who will never be on stage preaching to a full auditorium backed by a band. It is eye roll fodder like you would not believe. And as of this weekend, I have unfollowed it. I'm telling you that not because I deserve a pat on the back. Nor am I about to say that everyone gets a pass. The gospel is not about live and let live. There are times when Jesus expects us to call out our brothers and sisters when they

exploit the weak or bless behavior that is antithetical to Christ's gospel of love. But my eye rolls about this or that mega church pastor's Air Jordans does nothing to serve the kingdom of God. In fact, little by little, bit by bit, it does something to my heart and shapes what comes out of my heart. Because I am not neutrally curious when I see a preacher in \$1200 sneakers. I can immediately come up with any number of insults while eye rolling more than a put-out twelve year old. And that is exactly what Jesus is warning his hearers about. Every insult, every eye roll chips away at the kingdom God is trying to build, the very community God has been trying to build from the beginning. In the garden Adam and Eve are told that we are built for community. In the desert God gives the people the law not to hem us in, but to help us be in relationship with God and one another in a faithful and life-giving way. And here, Jesus warns us yet again about what happens when we do not care for our elders or other vulnerable ones, when we envy our neighbor, when we write off someone with whom we disagree, when we deceive or undermine another, when we stop seeing each other as God's beloved children. When we insist doing things just so, and worshiping God with our mouths, while failing to do and be all that God has called us to do and be in here and out there, we lose our way. We muddy the waters and poison our relationship with God and neighbor. And the beloved community God longs to create in and through us frays a bit more. We are contaminated, and when we turn that eye-rolling, contempt-filled flu loose in the world, we are not who God creates and calls us to be either. Our hearts are infected, the body of Christ is wounded, our witness to the Good News is damaged, and God's heart breaks.

But the great good news is this: as the psalmist reminds us, a contaminated heart is not a permanent condition. God has always been eager to forgive, to mend us and fix us so that we can be part of God's mending and fixing work in the world. And that mending and healing comes to us in flesh and blood in Jesus Christ, who in case we forget, came into the world to save sinners, came into the world to show us God's unfailing love for us and for all. In response to his saving ways, we are called to be better and do better, to confess when our hearts have been filled with contempt, and to welcome the chance to start again.

So yes, it is good to wash our hands, and while we're at it, we may want to invite God to give our hearts a good scrubbing as well.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.