

Hungry Hearts

In the name of him whose Words fill us with light and life, dear friends in Christ: the Gospel reading for today is a continuation of the lesson we heard last week. Because the comments Jesus makes hang on what has come before, it will be helpful to review briefly. This is what happened: some Pharisees observed the disciples of Jesus eating a meal with what they called “unwashed hands”. And please don’t misunderstand. We’re not talking about a lack of basic hygiene here. The hands of the disciples were relatively free of dirt. No, the grave offense to which the Pharisees were objecting was that the disciples had not performed a certain ceremony of *ritual* cleansing before they ate. This ceremony was a tradition the Pharisees had developed over time that had pretty well passed into common usage among their fellow Jews – at least among those who considered themselves to be pious. The idea behind the tradition was that the Lord gave the priests of Israel certain instructions about ritual cleansings that they were to do as a part of leading of public worship. The Lord gave these instructions for illustrative purposes: they pictured for the worshippers how the Lord cleanses his people from sin and makes them holy.

Ah, but the Pharisees thought of the ritual washings as something more than that. They imagined that the mere mechanical performance of these rituals actually made people and things righteous in the sight of God. They reasoned that if the Lord wanted washings to be done in public worship as a way to sanctify the proceedings, why then, how much more holy and righteous would their own lives be if they applied the same sort of washings to their daily routines. It was typical of the Pharisees’ way of thinking: that holiness of life consists in the outward performance of rituals – and the more you do, the more holy you are. It’s the same thinking that drives the faith of Islam, and unfortunately that always seeks to infiltrate the Church. It places the focus on what I do to make myself righteous rather than on what God is doing to cleanse me from sin.

But like I said, most of the Jewish faithful were following these hand washing rituals. They thought of them as a God-pleasing thing to do. So when the Pharisees saw Jesus’ disciples disregarding these supposedly sacred traditions, it seemed an egregious breach of propriety. It was for them a “gotcha moment” – a way to discredit Jesus. They thought, “What a lousy teacher he is that his disciples don’t even know not to defile themselves by eating with unclean hands. What is this foolish man teaching them if he can’t even get the basics down right?”

In response to their attack, Jesus told them that their silly man-made traditions had nothing to do with making anyone righteous before the Lord. He said, you think to honor God with all your rigmarole and ceremony; but it’s all an empty show. You’re hypocrites. You make up your own rules and then pat yourself on the back for keeping them; but your hearts are far from God and true righteousness. In fact, some of your traditions even go against the commandments of God.

It’s at this point, then, that Jesus addresses the crowd telling them that nothing going into a person can defile him; rather it’s what comes out of a person that causes defilement. Now, this statement would have been a shock to them. After all, it was widely believed that not performing the ritual washings before a meal – that is, to eat with unwashed hands – made a person unclean in the sight of God. Jesus refuted that. But even if he was right about *that* not

making a difference, you still had the Jewish dietary laws to contend with. Remember that when the Lord handed down the Law to Moses, he declared a number of food items off limits for his people. Pork, shellfish, certain kinds of birds and other animals, these were all labeled *unclean*. They were not to be consumed. This wasn't just a tradition of the Pharisees. This was the Law of God. So how could Jesus say that nothing going into a person could defile him? It seemed only logical that if you ate food that the Lord declared unclean, then you'd be made unclean by consuming it. Jesus flatly denies it.

How can that be? Well, to understand it needs to be pointed out that the dietary restrictions the Lord gave his people belong to the category of *ceremonial* laws. They have nothing to do with the moral law; that is, basic questions of right and wrong. Nor were they given, as some have supposed, for health reasons. Yes, undercooked pork can cause problems – but so can any other kind of meat if it's not cooked properly. No, the dietary restrictions were, sort of like the ritual washings, given for illustrative purposes. The idea was that God's people were on a restricted diet not just of food; but more importantly of *spiritual* food. They were to avoid unclean food as a way of showing how they were to limit what they allowed themselves to ingest in terms of the teachings of the pagans and their gods. They were to abstain from all that false religion and feed their souls only with God's Word – the Bread of Life.

The dietary restrictions served another purpose: they helped keep God's people physically separate from their idol worshipping Gentile neighbors. It's hard to assimilate if you have to keep Kosher. It's like what happens when someone's son or daughter marries a vegan, which is not, as you might have guessed, an alien from a planet that orbits the star Vega; rather it's someone whose self imposed diet *makes you think* they're from another world. A strict vegan eats only things derived from plants. No animal products allowed. So it's not just meat that's off limits, it's also eggs, milk, cheese, butter, ice cream—all that, along with anything else that might have been cooked in animal fat or in animal stock or with any animal byproduct. The point is that it's awfully hard to sit down and eat with such a person. Say you're having Thanksgiving at your place. All the extended family is there. You've prepared the classics: Turkey with giblet gravy, corn bread stuffing with sausage; there's corn slathered in butter and cream, and those green beans drowned in a chicken stock based mushroom soup with those crispy fat-fried onions on top. There's pretty much nothing on the table your vegan son or daughter-in-law can eat. Ah, but you've thought of that. You pass them a nice bowl of steamed Brussels sprouts that you've painstakingly kept away from every molecule that might have come from an animal just so they wouldn't feel left out and could eat something with you. The person looks them over suspiciously and asks with an air of self-righteous arrogance, "Were these raised *organically*? I can only eat *organic* non-GMO produce." You tried to accommodate; but now you've had it. Certain that they're not going to eat the Brussels sprouts, you smile sweetly and helpfully suggest something else they might do with them. It ends badly. So the next year, to avoid the same sort of conflict, the vegan family member suggests you come to their place for Thanksgiving. And maybe you do—*once*. After that you know better. Tofu and quinoa casserole washed down with organic alfalfa sprout juice makes for an unsatisfying Thanksgiving meal. You dare not expose yourself to it twice. You realize there's no way you are ever going to enjoy a meal with this person, so you stop trying.

It was the same thing for the Jews in the ancient world. They couldn't eat with their pagan neighbors – and especially back then if you couldn't eat with someone, you couldn't live with them. So the dietary laws kept God's people apart and helped preserve their ethnic identity even when they were scattered as exiles among the nations. It was God's way of preserving his people – and more importantly preserving the lineage that would lead to the birth of his Son,

Jesus Christ—the heir to the throne of David. You'll note that the dietary restrictions were all lifted in the New Testament period. By then it was no longer necessary to preserve the line to the Savior; he was already born. And at that point the Lord didn't want to keep his people apart; he wanted them to be able to go into the entire world sharing the good news. To do that, they had to be able to mingle freely and break bread with Gentiles – so he cancelled the dietary laws.

But the Pharisees, the people in general, and even the disciples of Jesus did not yet understand that. They were locked into a mode of thinking that said: You are what you eat. If you eat unclean (whether with unclean hands or unclean food) you *are* unclean. And you see what they were doing was misdiagnosing the problem of the human condition. They thought of it as being a matter of the stomach. Eat right and be righteous. It was easy. Jesus – and you can practically feel his frustration as he spells it out for his disciples – says, “Don't you guys get it? It doesn't matter what or how you eat. All that is external. Food comes in and it passes out. It doesn't change who and what *you* are. It doesn't affect your standing before God. Your problem is *internal*. It's what's in your heart not your stomach that makes you unclean. It's what the heart spews forth: the lies, the lusts, the hatred, the greed – it's all that nasty stuff coming out that makes you unclean.

To most of us this is obvious. We are much less likely to be wrapped up in the notion that how or what you eat has anything to do with your spiritual condition – although it does sometimes crop up among Christians. Where we are more likely to be taken in, however, is in the idea that righteousness is an external thing. It's in how one behaves and acts rather than in how one thinks and feels. We think, as long as I *behave* correctly and do what's right my thoughts and motives do not matter. In fact, we're likely to congratulate ourselves and count ourselves righteous for *not acting* on our evil impulses. Say you're dealing with a particularly disagreeable person, someone who's insulted you or caused you some kind of loss. You'd really like to throttle them, or give them a piece of your mind – both barrels, as it were. But you don't. You hold yourself in check and fume inwardly while outwardly you're as polite as punch to them. Would it ever occur to you to repent of the ill will you have toward that person – or would you be more likely to think, “The good Lord must be pleased with me for the way I handled that one.” And a week later, when you hear that some minor tragedy has struck the person in question – would it ever occur to you to repent of the wave of satisfaction you feel thinking to yourself, “Ha! He got what he had coming.” How would you like it if the Lord gave you what you have coming?

Although the fruit of sin is seen in outward acts, its root is deep inside the heart. And even if the fruit is never seen due to your extraordinary exercise of self-control, the darkness within remains. In fact, it can be even worse for you spiritually if you do keep it hidden inside because then you're more likely to deceive yourself into thinking how good you are for having done so. Remember it was the self-righteous Pharisees who had a harder time coming to Christ than the notorious public sinners.

In today's Gospel, Jesus puts his finger on your problem. It's your heart. That's what's unclean. Or, borrowing this theme of food and diet that permeates today's reading, you might say that it's your heart that's *hungry*. It made me think of that song by Bruce Springsteen in which he sings in the refrain, “Everybody's got a hungry heart.” I'm sure you've heard it; but I wonder if you know the lyrics. I didn't, so I looked them up. It's really a pathetic piece. A guy's in a bar trying to meet someone new. He has a wife and kids that he abandoned, apparently because he couldn't handle the pressures of being a husband and father. He met his wife in this same bar several years back. And now, after having left her, he feels lonely. So now he's back trying to find someone else to fill the void in his hungry heart. That's pretty much all there

is to it; but what strikes me is how totally self absorbed the guy is. It's all about him. It's all about meeting his needs. Who cares about the aching holes in the hearts of those he left behind? Not him. And what will he do when the next person he finds fails to satisfy the hungers of his heart? Will he abandon her too?

I've never thought of Bruce Springsteen as much of a theologian; but I think Jesus would agree with him on this point at least: Everybody's got a hungry heart. We are by nature takers, not givers. Everything is always about me – about me being happy, about me getting what I want, about me convincing myself that I'm a good and decent person. In this way the human heart is like a black hole in space. It's a great analogy because, as you probably know, a black hole isn't a hole at all. It's a collapsed star that's so dense that a pea sized piece of it would weigh more than our entire planet. It generates an incredibly powerful gravitational field that sucks into it all surrounding matter. The pull of its gravity is so strong that it bends the light the star generates back into itself. Nothing escapes. So all that is seen is darkness; and all that's felt is the relentless pull its voracious appetite. The more it takes in, the harder it pulls on everything else. It's never satisfied. Such is the sinful heart in each of us – even if outwardly we pretend it isn't so; even if outwardly we shine with what appears to be the light of good deeds and polite behavior. They are nothing of the kind, for what lies behind them are false pretenses and evil, self-serving or self-justifying motives. They are in fact dark deeds and defiled behavior that lead to eternal death.

There's only one thing that can truly satisfy our hungry hearts, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ and his righteousness. But he can only enter and fill our hearts when we see them for what they are: desperately unclean and insatiably self-centered. When we recognize that we will relinquish any and every claim we have to self-generated goodness and we will turn from what we are with disgust and loathing. Then in repentance we will reach out for the cleansing and restoration that only Christ can give. We will hunger and thirst for his righteousness and the forgiveness that he purchased with his own blood on the cross when he died for our sin.

And, as he has promised, he will fill our hungry hearts with himself, with his truth, and with his love. And then something truly amazing will happen. The light of Christ will shine outward from us. These black holes will become increasingly bright stars, shining forth not the false light of our imagined goodness, but the genuine article. It will be the bright light of the Lord Jesus Christ using us as the members of his body to love and to sacrificially serve our neighbors – just as he loves and serves us. Today and every day, may he so satisfy our hungry hearts, that we may shine forth with the brightness of his glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!