

## How Will People Know?

How will people know that we belong to God?

That appears to be the question that is at the heart of today's Gospel lesson.

Different folks answer that question in different ways.

The Pharisees answer the question by insisting on very strict purity rules: rules that have them washing everything they eat, washing their hands and cups and pitchers and kettles: and condemning those who don't do the same.

Now, for you moms who are thinking, "What's wrong with that?" this washing wasn't about hygiene; germs and such were a long way from being discovered.

It was about religious ritual – such that the cleaning is done in a very particular way, using a certain amount of water, holding your hand in just the right position.

Today, most folks look at the Pharisees as the very definition of hypocrisy.

But if you take a closer look, you can't dismiss them that easily.

Like you and I, the Pharisees are complicated, they have good explanations for doing what they do.

As you know, the Pharisees were not priests or clergy of any kind.

They were a group of lay people who took seriously God's command through Moses that the people of Israel be holy, just as God is holy.

So while the Jewish law only requires the priests to wash, and then only to wash before making a sacrifice to God or eating sacrificial food; the Pharisees say:

“Look, if we, as Moses says, are a nation of priests, then everyone should wash, and not just before a sacrificial meal, but before every meal.”

In a time when the people of Israel were occupied by Rome and inundated by Greek culture, the Pharisees were, in many ways, a commendable group trying their hardest to keep and grow a distinctly Jewish identity among the people of Israel, so they would remember who they are, and who they are called to be, in the face of massive cultural challenges.

By this tradition of washing, they mark themselves off as people faithful to God; people therefore entitled to receive God’s blessing.

We are not so far removed from that kind of thinking.

While we Christians may be many hundreds of years separated from the Pharisees, we too have our own ideas about purity; except we don’t call it “purity,” we tend to refer to it as “what’s right,” or “what Jesus intended,” or “a place for everything, and everything in its place.”

And so we Episcopalians are often seen as the model of establishment Christianity.

We are often morally upright and we are good citizens; but we are also, as a group, traditionally very slow to respond to issues of social injustice or the need to make structural changes to our society for the benefit of those without.

And then there are our Roman Catholic friends who refuse, on direction from the pope, to recognize non-Roman churches as churches.

We and all the other non-Romans are called "ecclesial communities" because, according to Benedict XVI, we are not part of the true Church of Christ.

And then there are some of our brother and sister Christians who deny the whole idea of evolution while others try to collapse Christianity into a Leave it to Beaver family friendly cult that looks down its nose at anything that isn't a blond haired blue eyed Jesus.

And truth be told, each of us, sometimes quietly and sometimes loudly, are quite sure that we, not them, have the inside track with God.

We are, we whisper silently to ourselves, a bit cleaner than all of the rest of them.

So modern Christianity is in no position to sneer at those Pharisees.

Make no mistake, we need to have boundaries and traditions and rules and doctrines.

Without these things, the wine has no skin to be poured into; without such things, we can't know who "we" are.

The problem is not boundaries or traditions or rules or doctrines.

The problem arises when we, like the Pharisees, substitute boundaries, traditions, rules and doctrines for the wild, unpredictable, ever challenging, ever demanding, ever growing, ever cajoling, ever longing, ever insistent, Spirit of the Living God.

We forget, to our peril, that God is not chained by what makes us comfortable, but God is always calling us beyond who we think we are.

“God often won’t respect the boundaries we create and carefully protect.

Drawing lines in the religious sand may serve our purposes; separating good guys from bad guys can be helpful, because it’s hard to know that you’re on the inside unless you know who’s on the outside.

But God could care less about anxieties of this sort.

Untamed grace keeps pouring out into alien territory.” (Don McCullough, paraphrase)

So Jesus has a message for the outraged Pharisees today –

“If you think that your rules or doctrines or traditions or beliefs sum up the substance of the Living God, then your god is too small!”

And then there is this.

Once we come to glimpse the unending yearning God has for all of creation, for all human beings, then we slowly come to realize that whether the issue is terrorism or the emancipation of Afghan women or homosexuality or women priests or humanists or conservatives or liberals or war or peace, whatever human reality you name; this is true: if we follow Jesus, don’t expect to stay clean!

You’re gonna get dirty!

Roy Pearson puts it this way:

“It is a fact too long neglected that the church has in common with the chimney sweep that it cannot do its job in comfortable surroundings or with clean hands.

In this sense, cleanliness is not next to godliness, dirt is.

Dirt, pain, sorrow, prejudice, injustice, treachery.”

These, and more, lie in wait for the follower of Jesus.

We are constantly called by Jesus out of our easy chairs and into the hard folding chairs where sit our impoverished neighbors, our friends of different faiths, our children whose sexual orientation may differ from ours.

What Jesus seems to be getting at today is that we will find him just as often at the graffiti littered smelly bus stop as we find him in the sweet scented quiet solitude of the church pew.

Jesus comes to us where we are.

I learned this week that the literal translation for the word “unclean” that we hear in today’s gospel doesn’t mean “dirty” as much as it means “ordinary” or “common.”

The distinction the Pharisees were drawing wasn’t about hygiene; what they are getting at is separating what is holy and what is ordinary; in other words, **separating** the holy from the common.

Religious people from the Pharisees right up through today tend to believe that the holy is located somewhere other than in and amongst the ordinary, the common.

Religious people often believe that somehow, if the common, the ordinary, touches the holy, the holy will be contaminated.

Jesus comes to show us that God is most immediately, most tangibly, most substantially, in what we call common, in what we call ordinary.

Jesus comes to show us that the holy is never contaminated by the ordinary – indeed, the holy – like yeast mixed with dough – like seeds planted in good ground – like the Word becoming flesh, the *holy* contaminates the *ordinary*, making ordinary things, like you and me, holy.

So how will people know that we belong to God?

It won't be through slavish adherence to doctrine.

It won't be through building walls or drawing lines that keep folks out.

In truth, the answer has never changed: from the call to Israel to be a people freed from slavery right through the gospel of Jesus Christ until today, the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost in the year 2012.

People will know we belong to God when we feed the hungry, when we care for the alien, when we take in the orphan and the widow, when we treat one another not with guile and deceit, but with a pure heart; recognizing always that there is nothing we can do which *entitles* us to God's love.

God's love is grace, pure and free.

God's grace is given **not** in exchange for a job well done, but because it pleases God to do so.

And for that, we can only say: "Thank you."

+amen