

St Pius & St Anthony 22nd Sunday Ordinary Time Year B2

I don't think I am alone in this. I think a lot of us kids suffered from this: but I confess that when I was a little kid, I confess especially that I was one of this very picky eaters. Not so much about what I ate, but I was 'very picky' about how the food on the plate looked, and that foods were not to touch each other. I know that how I say this will make me sound old, but kids have it so easy today. I wish we grew up with those foam compartmentalized plates, with individual sections and little walls to keep the green bean juice from running into the macaroni and cheese, or keep the corn out of the mashed potatoes. When I was a kid we only had those flat wide one section paper/cardboard plates. So yes, I was one of those, who was known to say, "I'm not eating those apples-cause pickles mixed in", or "I don't want that roll, its red with soaked beet juice!"

Well, I think of how picky/particular I was, when I hear about the **minutely, detailed** regulations that the Pharisees' traditions grew into, over time (It was a similarly compulsive overdoing it, that Jesus is reacting against in today's gospel) It is important to note that Jesus does not go out of **His** way, to run and point this out to the Pharisees themselves (they are coming after Him – He is responding to them today- He will have a 'cleansing of the Temple episode' (Jn 2:13–22, Mt 21:12–13; Mk 11:15–17; Lk 19:45–46) But up until then, Jesus holds a kind of 'live and let live' approach to them-that if they want to spend all of their valuable time obsessively washing hands and checking water purity, then so be it-that's theirs to do. But this whole confrontation arises because they come to condemn His disciples. And here to give a sense of how overly done their picky prescriptions are, here are some details of the layers and layers of their custom regulations: the hand washing had to be done from a two-handed cup (*because to start washing you'd touch one handle with unclean hand, but after one is washed then you only use the clean side handle*), the cup itself had to be purified ritually, (and it had to be immersed to qualify as purified), the water used had to have been stored in special vessels, and while washing hands, the water had to always be poured downward, and allowed to run downward off the hands or objects, and not just hands were subject to regulations, but also the food, the table, and anything that might touch any of all that had its own purity process (and not just these actions, but there were specific blessing words to went the work). (This may be, why fasting was so common back then, because if you had to go through all those steps every time you simply wanted a snack, then just forget it, I'd fast)

But again, this controversy arises as the Pharisees come to condemn Jesus' disciples. And what makes this interaction so serious (why the stakes are so high),

is that these aren't just neighborhood Pharisees arguing with Jesus. Notice who all is involved. Pharisees come assisted by scribes (scribes are secretaries clipboards documenting-recording it all) and where are they from but headquarters - Jerusalem (for us, that is like City Hall, Frankfort or Washington DC) to us). Jesus is having file opened up on Him, in Jerusalem for purity code violations!

Also, at this point I want to clean up a possible misunderstanding. Please keep in mind that handwashing or not, starts this controversy, but this fight is not over hygiene health. Yes, wash hands, it's always prudent to do that. The disciples had good enough table etiquette. I bet being fishermen, they were accustomed to washing their hands in the sea after handling bait, before eating their lunch. Also, I note that they were involved in food preparation for others, even huge crowds, Remember a couple weeks ago, when we saw them be excellent waiters, serving the multitudes without contaminating the crowd's dinner of loaves/fishes (if they weren't washed, then we might have picked up the Galilee Gazette newspaper the next week to read, "Massive outbreak of E.coli after miraculous feeding of 5,000".) So the problem here wasn't health or hygiene, it was about the obsessive detail the Pharisees created in customs to keep a monopoly over people's purity (in a religious sense). So, no child can use Jesus as an excuse to try getting out of handwashing ('Jesus' disciples didn't have to, why do I?') They washed, just not to the overly scrupulous level that the Pharisees upheld. This controversy between the Pharisees and Jesus was not about cleanliness, it was about control. I think we see the Pharisees' game here: Jesus says, "You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition" (Mk 7:8). That benefits them. Their demand for detail is self-serving to manipulate the masses. For example, with such extreme regulations, you have to have an enforcer of them, right? Oh, the Pharisees will conveniently take care of that – they've created their cause, or justified their job. And to have the enforcers, someone has to fund them. Oh, so now the Temple Tax rates go up. Again, we see this how many times (*self perpetuating bureaucracy*)

So Jesus steps in to confront the Pharisees by basically asking, "How does all this handwashing make you a better person?" If you want to purify, wash and cleanse something, start with your own heart. Starting with a pure heart first, that will be the best guide to what other customs truly serve God and help His people or not. I mentioned earlier the Pharisee 'whiteshirts with clipboards' that show up with their **audit checklists**. I love how Mark editorializes on that fact in today's gospel by mentioning the '**many other** things' the Pharisees enforce, specifying numerous examples himself - He uses the word 'AND' 6 times in two verses (Mk

7:3-4) to describe their fixation on “cups **and** jugs **and** kettles **and** beds.” With Jesus’ response, I hear Him telling them, “If you like lists, how about this one.” Jesus can produce audit inventories, task tables, duty rosters with the best of them. He provides a more important list, “How about purifying “*evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly*” (Mak 7:21-22). Not what’s on your cup, kettle or cutlery, but how about what’s in your heart, mind and soul – There is where we need to wash.” The inside first needs attention, and then the outside can be dealt with. God’s concern is with the unclean heart, not the unclean hand. God wants our hearts purified. And with pure hearts within us, then the outside actions will properly fall into place. But it starts with having God wash our hearts.