

I Noticed the Word “Defile.”

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“Who is preaching next week?” Jeanne asked me as she exited church last week. “It’s the text about hand-washing and, well, that seems a little complicated in the midst of a pandemic,” she reflected.

It turns out I’m the one preaching this week, dancing with a text that, if left unexamined, seems to call those concerned with hand-washing “hypocrites.” Though I think we will find a lot more there.

When we engage with a text it is often helpful to take note of what you notice - what word or phrase stands out to you? And then to wonder more about this word or phrase.

And so I am curious about what you noticed? Was there a word or phrase that stood out to you? What do you wonder about that word or phrase?

Jeanne noticed the hand-washing. And she wondered how an emphasis on inward cleanliness rather than outward cleanliness might land in this time and this place.

I noticed that washing cups and pots and bronze kettles were included with washing hands, and I wondered what that was all about.

I noticed the phrase “care for orphans and widows” and wondered who that might be describing for us.

I noticed, “Father of Lights.” I wondered what to do with the fact that I both love that phrase and wish that it weren’t gendered. What might we say instead? Source of all Light? Creator of Light?

I noticed that “anger” is only mentioned in the James passage, but that “wickedness” is mentioned in both, and I wondered what the phrase “bridle their tongues” in the James passage has to do with the long list of evil intentions attributed to the human heart in Mark.

And what do we do with this mention of “anger”? There’s a danger of coming too close to respectability politics which asks people to simply “be nice” in the face of injustice. We have a significant model of Jesus being angry when he threw over the tables in the temple. His anger was about those leaders of the temple defiling the temple by turning it into a marketplace. And yet the Bible, and these passages particularly, do have blunt and fair warnings about anger shading as righteousness.

I noticed the word “defile” and the proclamation that we are defiled by things from within rather than without, and I wondered if that sounded like a theology of original sin and how I felt about that.

I noticed the way the word “defile” shows up in both passages. Which is to say that I noticed how these passages seem to talk both to and past each other.

I noticed that the James passage says “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Unstained by the world. So the James passage is concerned with being defiled by the world while the Mark passage is insisting that we are defiled from within, by evil intentions.

I wondered what it would mean to start asking how these things from within defile our religion. How do they defile our worship? How they might defile our life together as a community of faith?

Slander? Pride? Folly? What from that list stood out to you?

Here is something not to be missed about the text: Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites because they were getting worked up about the wrong things entirely, quite possibly simply playing a game of “gotcha” to credential themselves against and above Jesus.

Jesus responds not by answering the question of hand washing, but by addressing the underlying issue of tradition. The Pharisees were elevating their own rules about how things ought to be done, their own ideas of decorum and propriety, above God’s commandments.

The Pharisees were citing rules about what it takes to be clean enough on the outside to be acceptable to God.

They are not acting the way we think they should act, the Pharisees were saying.

And so Jesus was not really saying - who cares if people wash their hands? Or even - there is not a thing in the world that can defile you.

Jesus was saying something much more like: all the purity rules you have, this purity culture, these ideas that people cannot be acceptable got God without ritual, this insistence that if people do things according to your traditions then they are acceptable in the sight of the Lord, and if they do things outside of your tradition then they are not - that is all malarky.

What sort of malarky about tradition and ritual have you witnessed among people of faith? Among this community of faith?

I suspect that Jesus would tell us to be less concerned with tradition and more concerned with how we talk to and about each other. I suspect that Jesus would tell us to be less concerned with ritual and more concerned to avoid slander, pride, and folly. I suspect that Jesus would tell us to tend to our Spirits. To lean into our worship of the living God. To figure out, again and again, how to honor God with more than our lips. How to be doers of the word, and not hearers only. How to honor God with our lives.

These passages don't talk past each other as much as they dialogue with each other about how to be a people that keeps authentic worship at the fore. There is a purity that matters, it's just not the purity culture that haunts the modern religious landscape, and it's not a purity born of the divide between what is secular and what is sacred. It is also not a purity achieved by clinging to tradition or precise ways of doing things. Perhaps this startling mention of widows and orphans provides our greatest hint that we

are to be formed by a purity that is generative, one that does the dirty work of caring for those whom our systems have failed, one that allows us to respond to the brokenness of the world with loving intentions. One in which our whole selves - our lips, our tongues, our ears, our minds, our hearts, and our bodies - respond to God's deep and abiding love.

You and I get to wonder together: am I willing to examine myself in service of that sort of purity?

Through all of the shadows, tangles, and change that lies ahead, may we live in such a way that the bright light of the Creator of Lights might guide the way toward generous and whole living with and among each other in this world.