Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The text for this morning’s message is the Gospel for this day.

I had to wonder this week if it was just coincidence that the Bible reading on hand-washing coincided with the children returning to school where every Kindergartener will learn that you should sing a whole verse of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” (or the ABC song – they’re the same, you know) while you are scrubbing your hands with soap. I had “hand check” every day when I taught. One little boy had such rough hands his never looked clean even after a re-wash. I mentioned it to his mother (a pre-school teacher) and she told me she had tried pouring bleach on them to no avail – poor kid. Add to that the very real threat of a cataclysmic flu season – especially for children and young adults and with USA Today predicting “90,000 deaths and 2 million patients possible” and you wonder if the Pharisees weren’t right to point out that the disciples were eating with “common hands.”

The Pharisees knew how to scrub. Know where they learned it? The Gospel says it was the “tradition of the elders,” (literally the “passing down from the old ones”) but long before that, it was God who insisted that cleanliness was next to Himliness.

The “traditions of the elders” that dictated hand-washing, ritual bathing and almost incessant scrubbing of pots, cups and bronze kettles, not to mention a good scrubbing of anything and everything that came from the market. This is what we’re supposed to do, you know – leave no apple unwashed and no turnip unturnip-turned (preferably under soapy water to begin with as you wash all the germs away)! Leading one to question just “How Clean is Clean Enough?”

If you or I had been there, wouldn’t we have cringed over those disciples’ defiled digits? Don’t we all carry with us at least a bit of “elder tradition” that may or may not be true? All of you who refuse to refrigerate bananas because it’s bad for them, well, you’ve been suckered by an “elder tradition.” Having realized that most people who heard last week’s sermon would strongly remember the origins of the word hubbub I thought I would give you a new factoid. Back in the 1950’s Chiquita Bananas needed a word to rhyme with the word “equator” in their advertising jingle that claimed their bananas came from way down by the equator so “never, never, never, never put them in the refrigerator.”

That’s “elder tradition;” the truth is that once they are as ripe as you like putting them in the fridge slows down the ripening – though it does turn the skins black. “Elder tradition” - rules that began somewhere but through the passing of years became either irrelevant or larger than life, as for example, in the gospel this morning. We might think it a little excessive to wash our pots, pans and plates before and after using them, but bring a Pharisee back from the dead and put him in a kitchen and let him get a load of our machines that wash our cups and kettles, and that Pharisee might think us a bit overboard, too.
The problem is all about misdirection; about making a minor thing into a major thing and in the process missing the essence of the original intent entirely and placing your trust in something that cannot help but fail and fall short. The purity laws of Leviticus weren’t all bad. The ban on shellfish kept the people from a major cause of sickness – as did not eating pork, which when improperly butchered, could lead to trichinosis. Washing things was a good habit – undoubtedly kept people from becoming ill.

But the Pharisees weren’t there to point out hygiene for health’s sake. By this time in His public life, Pharisees and scribes who came to see Jesus were no longer looking for saviors; they were looking for scapegoats; someone to blame for everything that was wrong in their world. The gospel says rather innocently that they “noticed” some of Jesus’ disciples eating with unwashed (literally “common”) hands but from the rest of the passage it is clear that they weren’t noticing anything; they were looking for something to find fault with in Jesus.

That’s why Jesus called them “hypocrites”, pretenders, hiding themselves behind the pretence of squeaky clean godliness and taking potshot at the less righteous, the “common,” the “unwashed,” with whom they never associated, nor whom they ever even considered worth their time and their attention.

In the world of Pharisees and scribes, the poor deserved their poverty; the sick deserved their diseases and the sinners deserved self-righteous sneers from those who thought themselves above such “commonness,” and such “defilement.”

I think Jesus probably washed His hands a lot. It was the mother’s job in the house to teach her children all the proper laws of Israel – how to please God from the time they awoke until the end of the day. As a boy he no doubt went with her to the well where she got the water for washing and cooking in the cool of the morning. I don’t know if he did dishes. I remember begging my Mom to let me help her and then, after a dish or two, saying, “I’m not sure I like this.” Jesus wouldn’t have objected - He certainly didn’t object or reject the sacrifice of Mary who washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

Though He was sinless and without stain or blemish Jesus never, ever, hesitated to reach His heart and His hands into the messy world where sinners stumbled from one sin to the next in the desperate struggle to make something go right. He did what He had to do and what He came to do. And if that seems a little foreign, well, let me remind everyone of you that has ever or will ever change a diaper, as my wife mostly did with our children, you, too, will be putting your hands where you don’t want them to go.

That willingness set Jesus apart from the self-righteous of Israel. He knew where evil thoughts and attitudes and actions came from; they came from inside, from human hearts scarred with sin – they still do, don’t they?

As I said earlier the problem in this gospel is misdirection; all sinners, all common and unclean with some looking for love in all the wrong places perhaps avoiding church and the reminder of their sins and others hiding in religiosity - bloated, self-inflated hypocrites of the high places in the church pretending to be pious. Jesus comes along and says, “You’re both misdirected.”
“Self-righteous fools, you can wash all you want to, but you’ll never scrub the stains off your soul.” Says Jesus to the Pharisees and to the rest, “Come back to me and I will heal you.”

Which message tugs at your heart today? Be careful how you answer because every one of us has a little Pharisee inside. All of us have moments of sneering, scoffing and standing in judgment of those who have made poor choices and cannot or will not look at them with compassion and see in them the person that very well could be you – or me.

Compassion is the key. And compassion cannot come from rules and regulations. Compassion literally means, “to suffer along with.” Jesus came beside us, became one of us to suffer with us and ultimately to suffer and die for us. In this confrontation on hand-washing Jesus diagnosed the heart problem for all of humanity – all of us have dirty hearts – hearts in need of cleansing – of righteousness – a righteousness we cannot earn and don’t deserve. All of us, those with “common hands” or Scribes and Pharisees may seem, at times, to be squeaky clean on the outside but we are polluted on the inside where God looks for righteousness.

How do you get it – how do you get clean? You know how and you know from where. The simple answer is our baptism and the gift of faith. That is where we must return as our clean can never be clean enough. But in and through those waters Christians look to a dirty, ugly cross and a savior smeared with the sin of all humanity. We place our destiny into Jesus’ dirty wounded hands. That’s what the Bible means when it says “God made (Jesus) to be sin for us. He took it all into Himself.

Where does that leave us? Still struggling, I suppose, to rid ourselves of that awful list of human acts and attitudes. But also relieved; relieved that God, for Jesus’ sake, judges our hearts perfectly pure, and encouraged to embrace a “religion that is pure and undefiled before God.” We are not perfect; what we are is forgiven. And because we are forgiven we are encouraged to do the works of God with clean and caring hands – healing and helping hands – reaching out to all who are lost for we are surrounded by sinners – Pharisees and common people – all in need of the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ Jesus alone.

Amen.

Now may our strong God, without whom we are weak and wayward, protect us from dangers on the outside and evil on the inside, that we may do the works He has called us to do in Jesus, His perfect Son and our perfect brother.