

Introductory

This text has a parallel in Matthew (15: 1-20). Neither of those texts is appointed to be read on any Sunday in the TLH one-year lectionary. In LW, this text is more or less appointed to be read on Pentecost 15B. MOL meaning that 1 – 8, 14 – 15, and 21 – 23 are to supposed to be read, and I'm not sure whose idea that was to skip verses. The Matthew text is not included in LW or LSB.

After a three-week interlude spent in the sixth chapter of John, being taught about the Bread of Life by Him, we return to Mark and find Jesus at Gennesaret. When they docked there, everybody knows who He is, and they spread the word, and people brought sick people to Him to be healed. He is on the move, in “villages, cities, or country,” and they came to Him wherever He was.

Textual Notes

1. It's not the first time the Pharisees and Scribes have looked Jesus up. Earlier in Mark (2:1ff), we find Him in Capernaum, where some scribes observed Him pronouncing Absolution, and they called Him on it. Right after that (13ff.), they called Him out for eating with sinners, and then why do His disciples not fast (18ff.) like John's do, and then (23ff.) for working on the Sabbath.

About the time they decided to work out a plan on how to kill Him, He left them (3:7) and did other stuff, told parables, went over to Nazareth to be rejected, and then to the nearby town of Gennesaret, and now they're back! “Καὶ συνάγονται πρὸς αὐτὸν οἱ Φαρισαῖοι καὶ τινες τῶν γραμματέων – Then the Pharisees and some of the Scribes gathered together to Him.”

The verb is a word from which we get the word Sanhedrin – the Seventy wisest men in Judaism – and it may indicate a formal meeting. The preposition of motion has them “ἐλθόντες ἀπὸ Ἱεροσολύμων – coming from Jerusalem.” moving towards Jesus, seeking Him out. The previous calling out seems to have been carried out by local Pharisees. Now they bring in the Big Guns.

2. Not surprisingly, they detected a problem with some of the disciples of Jesus; “ὅτι κοιναῖς χερσίν, τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἀνίπτοις, ἐσθίουσιν τοὺς ἄρτους – that with unclean hands, that is unwashed, they are eating the food.” Seventeen times in the NT – all but one in the Gospels – writers use the word “νίπτω – clean.” Only twice, here and in Matthew's parallel, is “ἀνίπτοις – unclean” found.

The book of Leviticus (15:11) is the genesis of washings in OT Law, including ceremonial (ritual) hand washing. The Bible is not a book about the best diet. The prohibition against eating pork had nothing to do with botulism, and everything to do with God's Chosen People being markedly, observably different. To this day, it's one of the things widely known to make Jews different.

Nor is the Bible a book about personal hygiene. The directive to wash one's hands before eating is likewise not about hygiene, but about being different from everybody else; nobody else did that, and it wasn't hand washing like we think of hand washing. In ritual Jewish hand washing, water is poured from a vessel over outstretched hands, a basin catches the runoff, and no soap is involved.

Modern hand washing, so essential to our way of life, is a relatively new invention. In 1867, Scotch surgeon Joseph Lister pioneered washing hands before – and during – surgery, and washing the instruments, and he was mocked for it, especially by the Americans. We eventually got over it, American doctors wash their hands, and we all know that twenty seconds is all it takes.

To be “κοινᾶς – unclean” is the opposite of “κοσῆρ – kosher,” and I'm not sure just how much time we want to spend on that and on the concept of being ceremonially unclean. What I probably will be spending more time on is the whole matter of tradition; what it is, what it is not, what role it plays in society and the Church, how and when traditions change, and the meaning of *adiaphora*.

It is the lack of washing the hands that make the eating itself unclean, ceremonially speaking. It's the sort of thing William Barclay would have a handle on, and I looked him up, and he does.

There were definite and rigid rules for the washing of hands. Note that this hand-washing was not in the interests of hygienic purity; it was ceremonial cleanness which was at stake. Before every meal, and between each of the courses, the hands had to be washed, and they had to be washed in a certain way.

He then goes on to articulate in a very clear, detailed, and understandable manner exactly what that “certain way” consisted of. I have hard copies of most of his *Daily Study Bible Series* and have been using them for years. But you don't need the hard copy to see his very good description of cleaning. It's online, and it's free, at studylight.org, or just google his name and the verse.

The WIK article on *Handwashing in Judaism* – I was surprised too – is quite thorough, and there are a lot of occasions on which hands are to be ceremonially washed. Based on those previous interactions with these religious leaders, and on how this thing plays out in the coming verses, you wonder if Jesus Himself had told them that, when it comes to that hand washing, forget about it.

And while I'm wandering about wondering about this and that, I can't help but notice that Jesus is not far removed from feeding 5,000 people, plus women and children. The Apostles did the actual distributing, and you wonder if the Pharisees were there, and they did not see them wash their hands, and whisper, whisper. Did the Pharisees report that to the Scribes from The Big City?

3. Mark is writing to the Christians in Rome, many of whom were not Hebrew, and so he explains what's the big deal about hand washing to people many of whom (Gentiles) did not do that. It's not just a Pharisee thing, but in fact the common people also and all in between; “οἱ γὰρ Φαρισαῖοι καὶ πάντες οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι – for the Pharisees and all the Jews” engage in that practice.

In doing that, they are all “κρατοῦντες τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων – holding on to the traditions of the elders.” The word “παράδοσις – tradition” occurs thirteen times in the NT, several of them in this exchange and in Matthew’s parallel of it. When Jesus uses the term, it is generally a negative thing, but twice Paul exhorts his readers to hold to it or to them, a positive thing.

Tradition – we have a lot of them -is a good thing. It becomes a bad thing when the tail begins to wag the dog, or when we forget the meaning of it, or when the meaning of it has become perverted. Tradition is a dogged thing; they are among the hardest things to change, especially in the church, and the changer needs to convince those he is trying to change that the change is for the better.

People understand the concept of tradition and generally have a lot of them. They just don’t know it. Some of the Lutherans like to say, “it’s just tradition,” as if tradition is meaningless. But try to change family traditions or traditions involving your sports team or other group, and you are going to get a fight. One generation passes them on to the next, and they are almost never written down.

It is incumbent on the current generation to pass those traditions on to the next, and especially in the church it has to be a very deliberate thing. In the classroom and from the pulpit, I will talk about the church year, the paraments, the stained-glass windows, the liturgy, and it is essential when teaching traditions to explain what the tradition means and why we do it when we do it.

During The Thing we stopped passing the plate and put them on tables in the narthex. We stopped doing Communion by “tables” and went to continuous line. It appears that both of those changes will be permanent. I see them both as going back to the way we used to do both of those things. Firstly, it speeds up the service, and the reality of it is that one hour is on a lot of peoples’ minds.

If you go to any of the Great Cathedrals in Europe or the village church, they are not likely to have pews because everybody stood. Most of them these days will have portable chairs. Pews are an American invention to make it easier to count heads, which is an American obsession. You get pews, you can pass the plate and keep an eye on who is giving what, which is rather noseey.

The Alms boxes in the Temple were located right inside the door, like we have been doing since The Thing, and last night at Elders we talked about making it possible for people to make EFT offerings, and that’s okay. I may have received my last box of checks in the mail last week. I carry a baggy with cash in the console of my car, but mostly use credit cards and online payments.

So there, in quick fire, three long-standing traditions: moving from tables to continuous line in Communion, receiving the offering without passing the plate, and making it possible to give your offerings online and even at a regularly appointed time. None of them are either commanded or forbidden in the Bible, and the last one could not have been imagined by the Inspired Writers.

4. Continuing to speak to the Romans (RSV has it parenthetically), Mark explains that they do that with other things as well, and Barclay has a handle on those other things as well. He explains them

in *Daily Study Bible Series*, summarizing, “To the scribes and Pharisees these rules and regulations were the essence of religion. To observe them was to please God; to break them was to sin.”

Barclay finally points out that “there is a fundamental cleavage here – the cleavage between the man who sees religion as ritual, ceremonial, rules and regulations, and the man who sees in religion loving God and loving his fellow-man.” Indeed, it’s one of many things that separate the Christian religion from every other religion, past, present, and future, whose essence is just those things.

He talks about how the Jews “βαπτισμοὺς” things like cups and pots and utensils and beds. The verb is “βαπτίζω,” a general word for general washing. The Anabaptists and other who insist on immersion teach their disciples that the word means “to immerse,” and so does biblehub. The use of the word here conclusively shows that it includes but is not limited to washing by immersion.

The word “ξέστης – pot” – which occurs in the NT only here – can include vessels of varying sizes, according to biblehub.com, but the commentaries accessed there acknowledge that it’s probably a larger vessel, like the one you would use when you’re ritually washing your hands, which is the thing being talked about here. Invite your hears to think about a fifty-gallon drum.

One of the commentators points out that you would not “immerse” your hands when washing like I said earlier. The word “κλίνη – bed” can mean a couch or what we would call a pallet, which are “baptized,” but which would hardly have been immersed. An interesting case of theology driving exegesis, but when you’re dealing with interpretation, it’s not really about exegesis, is it?

5. They speak directly to Jesus, an indication that Jesus was the instigator of the omitted hand washing, and that those who were His students were only doing what He told them to do. They have observed the what, now the “Διὰ τί οὐ περιπατοῦσιν οἱ μαθηταί σου κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων – why your disciples don’t walk according to the tradition of the Elders?”

They sound like the stranger in the grocery store asking another stranger why he can’t control his unruly children, but people don’t really do that anymore. Maybe more like the Principal asking the Teacher why she can’t keep control of her classroom. But when you ask “why,” you are not really asking a question. You’re making a statement; you need to get control of your subordinates.

6. The response of Jesus to their question – it’s actually a statement – is to tell them that the OT had talked about them, “Καλῶς ἐπροφήτευσεν Ἡσαΐας περὶ ὑμῶν τῶν ὑποκριτῶν – correctly Isaiah proclaimed about you the hypocrites.” That’s why His disciples don’t wash their hands. In an oddly coincidental way, this quotation is taken from the OT reading appointed for this day.

Then He goes ahead and quotes from Isaiah, a rather rare OT quotation in Mark, but one where the universal concept is easily understood by Jew and Gentile alike. They say the right thing “ὁ λαὸς τοῖς χεῖλεσίν με τιμᾷ – the people with their lips honor me, ἡ δὲ καρδία αὐτῶν πόρρω ἀπέχει ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ – but their heart is far from Me,” and it plays out in life in the way they act towards others.

Three years ago, I referenced the latest priest abuse scandal – the scandal train was in Pennsylvania then – and how the RC spokesmen always say the right thing – sort of, but what do they do about it? I concluded three years ago that we in the Church have to speak out against this evil. I have been doing that for many years in Adult Bible Class, and three years ago I did from the pulpit.

My church is in Grand Mound, Iowa. Grand Mound was one of the towns listed among the cities at the end of the movie *Spotlight*. It was bad, and when it came out it got a little bit ugly. Even when the RC say the right thing, they are slow to condemn homosexual child rape. We think Muslims should condemn Islamic terrorism. If the RC won't condemn the pedophile priests...

7. Then He departs from Isaiah with this scathing indictment; “μάτην δὲ σέβονταί με, διδάσκοντες διδασκαλίας ἐντάλματα ἀνθρώπων – in vain, therefore, you worship me, teaching as doctrine the commandments of men.” The Septuagint renders Ecclesiastes 1:2 “ματαιότης ματαιοτήτων – vanity of vanities,” and we can read that book to understand what Solomon means by that.

How could we think other than that Jesus had that book in mind when He here uses the cognate “μάτην – vainly” to describe the worship of the hypocritical Pharisees and Scribes. The verb “σέβομαι – worship” includes church, but more than just church alone. It includes the walk through life in life outside of church as well, what we might think of as the Christian Ethos.

There is a new Phariseeism worming its way into the LCMS. People are adding laws that are not in the Bible to the Ten are there and teaching those laws as if they are. They are adding to the Law things like: women cannot be in the military, the one-year lectionary is the only correct one, and women should not use birth control. The problem is that none of those laws are in the Bible.

You can have those opinions on those and other things, and we all have opinions on them, but when you make laws out of your opinion and assert that your opinions come from the Bible, that's when you have become a Legalist. We had a problem with that during the Golden Age of Lutheran Phariseeism. The post-war liberal swing in the LCMS happened because of several things.

One of those things was a reaction against the oppressive Legalism running rampant through our church body. You want an eye-opening read on that subject, try *The Borderline Between Right and Wrong* by Dr. Theodore Graebner, Professor at St. Louis. That book is the fullest expression and canonization I have ever seen of the Legalism pervading our church body in his day.

We are just now recovering from that reaction, and has the pendulum begun to swing back in the other direction. The New Legalists are mostly younger men who were not born yet when The Walkout happened. They don't seem to appreciate the battle being waged since them for the heart and soul of the LCMS. Will the New Legalists cause New Liberals to arise among us?

Women in the military is a function of the state, not the church. There is no prohibition in the Bible on women serving in the military, and Deborah (Judges 4) not only served, but she was also a military leader. It's not unheard of for Christian women to fight in battle, most famously Joan of Arc, who was executed not for leading or for fighting, but for the crime of dressing like a man.

Women have often served in the military, including in our country, mostly as support personnel. As time goes on and the nature of warfare changes, women have been getting closer to combat all the time. For example, in WWII, most women didn't have the upper-body strength to manhandle a B-17 and especially a B-24. These days, a female F-16 pilot can do what a male can, for example.

See the CTCR document "*Women and Military Service: A Lutheran Perspective.*"

I have used the one-year lectionary and I have used the three-year lectionary, and most of our congregations and Pastors prefer the three-year. If you prefer the one-year, that's a matter of preference, not of law, and in fact the Bible is silent on the issue. It's silly to refer to the three-year as "The Pope's Lectionary," and just what does that mean? I asked that once. Crickets.

As I go through the three-year lectionary, I am continually amazed at pericopes included in it, but not in the one-year. Nobody knew about the Seventy – I call them "second tier" – Apostles in Luke because we never heard their account read and preached on. If you just run the numbers, the people in the pew get to hear three times as much different content in the three-year than the one.

Birth control has always been there, and if you want to go with OT civil law on that point, then be prepared to go down a very slippery slope. Birth control has always been there, and has often been practiced, but modern birth control pills et al have made it easier, more convenient, and more reliable. There have been downsides to that. It has made promiscuity all those things as well.

The more devastating effect is that procreation is often removed from sex. The fundamental purpose of sex is to keep the species going. With modern birth control and the perception of an overpopulated planet, there's a lot of sex going on with little thought of procreation. In fact, getting pregnant is often the last thing you want to result from even married sexual intercourse.

To be sure, the Bible teaches that children are a gift from God and a blessing to be treasured, and Christian parents do. I am happy when I see my young families have three or even four children, but if only four, then they're probably using some form of birth control, like a lot of husbands and wives do and always have done. Why would you want to deny yourselves more blessings?

There are lots of reasons, and they are almost always personal.

8. By their words and actions, these men show that “ἀφέντες τὴν ἐντολὴν τοῦ Θεοῦ κρατεῖτε τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων – you have let go the commandments of God, you hold on to the

traditions of men.” KJV and a few others add “as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do.” That is found in some manuscripts, a later and clarifying addition.

What a telling accusation! That they have “let go” – the word is used for the letting go of nets into the water and the letting go of sins, it is often translated “forgive” – of the commandments of God, They have let go of the Ten Commandment and replaced them with the traditions of man, to which they now “hold on,” a verb used when you grasp something and hold onto that thing for dear life.

9. And they have gotten very good at it; “Καλῶς ἀθετεῖτε τὴν ἐντολὴν τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἵνα τὴν παράδοσιν ὑμῶν τηρήσητε – well you set aside the commandment of God to guard the traditions.” To set something aside is not to ignore it but to treat it with absolute scorn and disrespect. The word “guard” is the word Jesus uses all the time when He exhorts His followers to guard the Word.

We see this all the time, the utter contempt for the Word by the adversaries of the Church, and a different kind of disrespect entirely on the part of those in the Church who have stopped even giving lip service to the Bible as authoritative. They have what Paul calls the “form” or religion, but lack the “substance” of it, and they can be pretty adamant about holding onto their “form.”

10 – 12. He quotes the Fourth Commandment, including the penalty of capital punishment for anybody who breaks it. That’s what Moses said, but “ὁμεῖς δὲ λέγετε Ἐὰν εἴπῃ ἄνθρωπος τῷ πατρὶ ἢ τῇ μητρὶ Κορβάν – you say if any man should say to His father and mother ‘it is korban.’” We see the very vivid contrast between what Moses and the OT say, and what you (plural) say.

Korban (קֹרְבָן) is a general word used for any of the various and varied sacrifices commanded by OT ritual law. “ἀκυροῦντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ τῇ παραδόσει ὑμῶν – making void the Word of God for your traditions.” The specific Word of which He speaks is the Fourth Commandment, the one about honoring your parents. You don’t do that, but you do offer sacrifices instead.

Nursing homes are a relatively modern invention. For most of human history, when people got old, when they were unable to take care of themselves, they simply died, often from lack of care. In some cultures, you took them out into the woods so you wouldn’t have to watch them die. The Hebrews, who had the Fourth Commandment, were the notable exception to that general rule.

That commandment does not have a shelf life, and Christians and Jews honor their parents all the days of their lives, including caring for them in old age. Here, these pious and hypocritical wealthy people were not doing that. But they are very spiritual, offering sacrifices in Temple. Do you think they told their parents that I can’t help because I’m giving too much money to the Church?

13. They have voided the Word of God, for “τῇ παραδόσει ὑμῶν ἢ παρεδώκατε· καὶ παρόμοια τοιαῦτα πολλὰ ποιεῖτε – the traditions of you, which you pass down, like many such things you do.” The second persons – and there are several of them – are all plural and emphatic. They have exchanged God’s Word and will and replaced it with their own, and where do we see that?

We see that in a lot of places, most noticeably in the “me” generation, and the generations after that – well, it isn’t getting any better, and it’s probably getting worse. You do realize, Boomers, that I’m talking about us. Great article from Alaska, *Death to the Me Generation* by Martin Kuz from June, 1997. I have a hard copy, but can’t bring it up on the Internet. Sorry about that.

Hymns

LSB 865 – Lord, Help Us Ever to Retain

Sermon Titles

Just Tradition?

The Traditions of Men

Man Made Laws

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa