

## Wash Your Hands, or . . .

At first glance, we might be on the side of the Pharisees here, especially these days with pandemic practices of handwashing and sanitizing. As we begin our week with Mark, Jesus and his disciples are eating with defiled hands, “that is, without washing them,” and the religious leaders are aghast. Of course, the religious leaders aren’t worried about COVID-19 germs here. They’re upset because Jesus (again) isn’t following the religious rules. But Jesus counters, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” In other words, their mouths are writing checks that their actions won’t cash.

Indeed, Jesus makes the point time and again that what truly matters is the state of the soul. The most ardent rule-follower can have a festering heart. It is from there that evil intentions come, Jesus says. “Fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

We then encounter a miracle story that, at first reading, seems un-Christ-like. A woman (a Syrophenician in Mark and a Canaanite in Matthew) brings her daughter to Jesus for healing. Jesus seems to dismiss her pleas, but the woman counters, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Despite what appears to be Jesus’s reticence to offer healing, the woman’s public proclamations of faith see her daughter healed and Jesus’s ministry expanded. The Gospel of Matthew recalls Jesus as saying, “Great is your faith!”, a reminder to us of the value of faith, even when all seems lost.

At the end of chapter seven, Jesus performs another miracle by healing a man who is deaf and mute. Again, he orders the man and other witnesses to tell no one. The people are bewildered and amazed, uncertain about the true identity of Jesus. Even when Jesus transforms seven loaves and a few small fish into a meal for four thousand, the people still ask for a sign from heaven. In perhaps the understatement of all understatements, Jesus sighs deeply.

Throughout the first part of Mark, we have read numerous miracle stories with people asking who Jesus is, but by the end of our readings this week, Jesus’s identity is apparent. He asks the disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” and Peter answers, “You are the Messiah.” With this pronouncement, we move into the second half of Mark, as the narrative shifts from stories of Jesus’s miracles to his teachings to the disciples. But just as the disciples sometimes have a hard time believing in the miracles, they also struggle with Jesus’s teachings. Jesus tells them that he will

undergo great suffering, be killed, and rise again. Peter reminds me of a consummate campaign manager who recognizes that this message won't sit well with the crowds. He takes Jesus aside, perhaps telling him to soften the words or recast them into more acceptable soundbites, but Jesus isn't having it. "Get behind me Satan," he tells Peter. Being a follower of Christ will not be easy, and he won't add a spoonful of sugar to help make the medicine go down. Deny yourself. Take up your cross. "And those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Gulp.

We end our week with the Transfiguration, one of the pivotal moments of the Christian story. In all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the Transfiguration follows the confession of Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. The Transfiguration is a further revelation of Jesus as the Son of God, as he is transfigured and shines with rays of divine light and joy. The prophets Moses and Elijah appear, and the three talk. Can you imagine the conversation? Peter (again, earnest Peter, bless his heart) offers to stake out the land and build a tent so they may stay there. But we know that we cannot, in this life, stay on the mountaintop. We hear a voice from the cloud, "This is my Son, the beloved," the type of words we all hope to hear one day, and then they descend the mountain, preparing for the difficult days ahead.