

Wash Your Hands ... It's Supper Time

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/wash-your-handsits-supper-time/>

"Kids, wash your hands. It's supper time!" Mom would call us in for the evening meal. And yes, we called it "supper." In those familiar, lyrical phrases in v. 18, Isaiah seems to be calling us this morning, before we share our special supper. But when the people in Isaiah's day heard these words, I'm guessing there were at least two surprises for them, as there are for us.

The first surprise was that God is speaking to us, not to those "other people." You know, those pagans out there. He's talking to people who have turned religion into superstition or magic-- "As long as I go to the Temple, take the Lord's Supper, go forward during revival meeting, recite the right words, I can live any way I want. Remember those games of tag we played as kids? The person couldn't touch you if you were at home base. So religion has become a game for some of us. Isaiah rebuked God's people for having worthless sacrifices (v. 11); solemn assemblies (vv. 13-14) and empty prayers (v. 15), and then going out and living like they wanted.

The second surprise? That Isaiah is talking about washing our hands and hearts from more than merely personal, private sins. You know the old saw that goes, "I don't smoke and I don't chew and I don't go with girls who do." Private piety, as if that's enough. There is that, but look closer. He is also talking about corporate, systemic sins, sins of the community and nation. Social sins. Right before this famous v. 18, we note the context--vv. 16-17. Isaiah is focused on social, corporate sins, too. "...seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (v. 17). And the word for rescuing the oppressed means more than offering them comfort (symptoms); it means dealing with root causes. Pleading for the widow means that God's people, the Church, are to be a voice for those who have no voice. Have you ever noticed? People who want to keep their religion private often do so in order to keep their religion separate...and useless. Not much more than a rabbit's foot for good luck.

Christian author Marva Dawn has wondered what it means when we take communion in expensive church buildings without seeing the hungry around us [*Powers, Weakness and the Tabernacling of God*, p. 99]. And what does it say to the world when we sit in our Sunday holy huddle in an expensive building and never share the Word of Christ with souls that are empty and craving to know God?

Do you know why the Lord's Supper is so central to our mission of both justice and evangelism? Because without Jesus' real life, real death and real resurrection. We have really sins and it really matters. The bread and cup give witness to the concrete reality. The problem with what the Israelites were offering God in our Isaiah text was that it just wasn't real.

Years ago, at another church, we decided to have a silent Lord's Supper service. It was powerful and moving. After the service, a physician came up to me and thanked me. He had been struggling with God's will, at a crossroads of his life. And God spoke to him in the silence (very humbling for a pastor who makes his living using words!). He was going to head his life in a more missional direction. Amazing! He had made the connection between worship and action.

Maybe in our Baptist tradition we have made too little of the Lord's Table. It's here at the Table that we enter the mystery of what God in Christ has done for us. When you're facing burdens too big to carry, run to the Lord's Table. When your heart has grown cold, run to the Table. When you're so tired you think you can't go on another step, come to the Table. When you're confused or lonely, come to the Lord's Supper. When you are interested in becoming a Christian and want to understand more, come to this Table. When you wake up one day and realize there is this dangerous disconnect--that your faith has nothing to do with the way you treat others, come to the Jesus Table. When you're loaded down with guilt and sin, run to the Lord's Table.

Now, wash your hands and hearts. It's supper time!