

September 2, 2018 • Holy Communion

**“Bread for the Heart”**

Sermon by Nathan Oney

*Mark 7:1-8, 14-23*

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

*‘This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;  
in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’*

*You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”*

*Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”*

*When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”*

Have you ever heard the phrase “You are what you eat”? I remember as a child being utterly perplexed by that saying. In my literal brain, I remember wondering what the adults meant when they said that. “In what way am I a chicken nugget?” As I grew older, I began to learn about the human digestive system, and I read how we indeed are what we eat—how food is made of molecular chemicals that we break down through the acts of chewing and swallowing, and how enzymes in our saliva and stomach break apart and transport those chemicals like iron, calcium, and glucose into our bloodstream to different parts of our bodies where they are finally deposited into our very cells.

The food that we take in becomes a part of us! It becomes our bone, and skin, and muscle. And if we take in more than we need? It either—in Jesus’ words—“goes out into the sewer,” or we store it as fat to provide us with energy later. It’s a miracle! It’s amazing! Food enables children to grow, athletes to build muscle; and in cultures across the world it has served as medicine. And it does even more than this: It brings people together. It provides joy. It nourishes us in body, gives us strength for the journey, and just plain tastes good.

It is also a subject on which almost everyone has a strong opinion. And I mean more than just little disagreements on preferences like hamburger versus hotdog or swiss versus cheddar. I mean that people have strong moral opinions about the food that others put in their bodies. I’m sure that I’m not alone in this experience: At the grocery store, I grab some staples: eggs, milk, bread, fruit. And just before heading to the checkout, I grab some ice cream. And as I wait for the register, a man behind me says, “Ice cream? You know that stuff is bad for you, right?” I’d say that he means well, but he doesn’t. He means it not as a piece of nutritional advice, but as a judgement. He means to assert his moral superiority, and he gets away with it because in our world we have divided food into good foods and bad foods, and we divide people the same way based on their food choices because you are what you eat, after all.

Jesus says “No.”

Now, I don’t think that Jesus would object to current medical recommendations to eat well-rounded, balanced meals, but food in Jesus’ day, as in ours, was about so much more than that. For the Jewish people in the ancient world, food was a part of the cleanliness laws.

There were some foods that were prohibited by these laws such as pork and shellfish, and there were additional rituals that were expected to be completed around the act of eating. Now, some scholars believe that, originally, there were important health reasons for these rules: pork often carried worms if it wasn’t cooked properly, and

shellfish, as any chef knows, is very difficult to clean. But for the Pharisees of Jesus' day, these rules weren't about health, but about ritual cleanliness in the sight of God.

Clean. Unclean. The implication was truly a question of value and inclusion: Is this person worthy of being included in the life of the community?

When Jesus in our scripture today fails to wash his hands before he eats, he fails to observe one of the cleanliness laws, and the Pharisees confront him. Now note that this doesn't mean that Jesus is eating with dirty hands.

According to Jewish historians, ritual hand washing was quite an ordeal involving blessed jars of water, and was unrelated to personal hygiene as a person was still required to undergo the ritual even if his or her hands were clean. Yet as a Rabbi, Jesus would have been expected to perform this ritual. But most of his followers wouldn't have been. You see, the jars for hand washing would not have been available for those with little financial means or for those who worked in the field: nearly everyone in an early agrarian society, apart from the wealthiest. When Jesus failed to wash his hands before eating, he condemned that law as unjust and succeeded in bringing to the table the people that the Pharisees looked down on as unclean.

After 2000 years, cleanliness in the form of "clean eating" has made its way into our language about food once again. And yesterday, I spent time with a friend of mine who is close to dying from an eating disorder because this language has caused her to link moral purity with body size and food choice. It has kept her and so many others from participating in community, from living full lives, from being seen as truly as valuable and included. So today, if you have been seen as unclean or if you have been struggling in vain to uphold some modern dietary laws, I have some good news for you.

Jesus doesn't look down on anyone. Jesus sees you. He sees past the arbitrary distinctions between clean and unclean. Past the hand washing and the cleanliness laws, past clean eating and keto and paleo. Past your body, whether it is strong, or frail, or large, or thin--He sees you! He sees beyond the food you put in your cart because it isn't what you eat that makes you clean or unclean, rather, it's what you have in your heart that counts. In the words of 1 Samuel: "...the Lord does not see as mankind sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (16:7).

So, as we turn to the table today for Holy Communion, that's exactly what I want us to do: Look at the heart. Look at all of the goodness that you have there. All of the brokenness. The hurt. Take it all and bring it to the table. Because we are all welcomed here, whether our hands are clean or dirty, whether we are rich or poor. Jesus invites all to the table even if the world sees you as unclean because the color of your skin, the size of your body, or the food you eat. Jesus invites you whether there is anger, or doubt, or hurt in your heart. Christ invites all.

So, when you take the bread and cup today, remember that this is not just bread for the body; the bread of life is bread for the heart. When we eat this bread and drink of this cup, we take in more than the mere molecules of food; we take in Christ. We take in Christ's goodness, Christ's patience, Christ's forgiving spirit. And the hope is that, through study, prayer, the support of this community, and the Grace of God, all these components—these molecules—of Christ get broken down and incorporated into the cells of your very being. Bit by bit, meal by meal, making us more in the image of our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Notes:

Hannah K. Harrington, "Clean and Unclean," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, vol. 1: A-C (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 681–89.

Frederick C. Grant and Halford E. Luccock, "Mark," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, vol. 7 (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951), 747–48

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