

Beyond the Surface

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Matthew 15:1-20 (NRSVUE)

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” ³ He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ⁵ But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. ⁶ So, for the sake of your tradition, you nullify the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

⁸ ‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁹ in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”

¹⁰ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶ Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

As the saying goes, “Beauty is only skin-deep.” That may be true, but it doesn’t keep us from pursuing it. The skin care market in the United States is the largest in the world, producing revenue of \$24 billion a year. Broaden that category to all beauty and personal care products, and it is projected that Americans will spend over \$108 billion in 2026, a per-person expenditure of \$313.25. Looking good is big business.

Many of the most common New Year’s Resolutions focus on physical attributes – losing weight, getting in shape, looking good. Of course, achieving those things may help us to feel better and improve our overall health; good goals to have in the new year. Maybe you have resolved to be a better version of yourself this year, to be healthier and happier and live more fully into your God-given identity. I have resolved to eat better, move more, and shed the extra 20 pounds I picked up over the last several months. I want to do that partly because I am tired of dealing with constant pain in my knees and partly because I don’t like the sight of my protruding belly. But I also know that without some intervention, those things are only going to get worse and will hinder my ability to be present for myself and for others. Yet, if I want to live more fully into God’s hope for me, I have to work on more than just physical aspects of my life.

In our scripture lesson for today, Jesus comes under fire from the Pharisees and the Scribes because his disciples didn't wash their hands before they ate. We should note that the Pharisees and Scribes didn't give a fig about the disciples' hygiene, nor were they particularly concerned about the germs they might be ingesting. They were upset because the disciples weren't following their rules and thought they were setting a bad example.

Jesus turned the tables and called out their hypocrisy. "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" Today, we might qualify that as an *ad hominem* attack by Jesus, though, to be fair, he knew their question wasn't sincere. They wanted to flex their legal muscle and make Jesus and the disciples look bad. But he was having none of it. In calling out their conduct, he revealed the illegitimacy of their question.

But, since they brought it up, Jesus used the question as an opportunity to address a deeper issue. "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Jesus was not saying we don't need to wash our hands before we eat. Let's be clear about that, especially in the height of flu season. Jesus was pointing out that the Pharisees and Scribes too often focused on the wrong things. Their strict insistence on following traditions overlooked the intent behind those traditions in the first place. Later in Matthew, Jesus would accuse them of being hypocrites who "strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." (Matthew 23:24)

Likewise, there is nothing wrong with making resolutions to improve our physical health or even our appearance. I don't think Jesus would be disappointed in me for wanting to drop a few pounds or be able to walk down a set of stairs without wincing. 30 minutes of moderate exercise every day might help me be thinner and more fit. It would also help me to lose excess weight, build muscle tone, and improve my cardiovascular health. But if my desire for change only extends to my physical body, I will miss a greater opportunity for meaningful change.

While we are focusing on our physical training, what are we doing to train our hearts? Not the literal muscle that pumps blood throughout our bodies, but our metaphorical heart, the center of feelings, thinking, and values? Are we attending to our mental and emotional health? Are we paying attention to our feelings and processing them appropriately? Are we investing in relationships and making time for the people who are most important to us? Are we balancing our desire to be well informed about current events with our need for self-care?

What about our spiritual lives? Are we intentionally growing closer to God? Are we becoming more perfect in love? Are we expressing our love of God by loving our neighbors? The First Letter to Timothy offers this advice: "Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." (1 Timothy 4:7-8, emphasis mine) Taking care of our physical bodies is wise and responsible, leading to healthier and happier lives. Taking care of our mental and emotional health keeps us thinking clearly and grounded, enabling us to be more fully present. Taking care of our spiritual lives helps us to be better disciples who grow in our relationship with God while also preparing us for life beyond this life.

The Pharisees and Scribes didn't exactly appreciate what Jesus said, but the disciples wanted to hear more. Later, they asked Jesus to explain what he meant.

Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.

Of course, we know that what we put into our bodies does matter, and what we eat can lead to either health or harm. Jesus was being hyperbolic for the sake of making a point, much like the prophets and psalmists did when they called God's people to a higher sense of purpose:

Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,

but you have given me an open ear.

Burnt offering and sin offering

you have not required. (Psalm 40:6)

And:

Is such the fast that I choose,

a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush

and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,

a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the straps of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke? (Isaiah 58:5-6)

The point isn't not to worship, but to go beyond rituals and live in a manner that reflects the faith that we claim. Otherwise, we might be inclined to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Likewise, Jesus wasn't saying that it doesn't matter if we wash our hands. He was urging us to think more deeply about what matters most.

What comes out of us says more about who we are than what we put into us. And what comes from our hearts matters more than what we take into them by what we see or hear. Yet,

we are also a product of our environment, and what we consume shapes who we are. What we listen to and read and watch impacts us, sometimes in subtle but powerful ways. A little diversion now and then can be a healthy release, but if we aren't thoughtful about what we take in, it can change us. Watching movies or shows that glorify violence can desensitize us to violence in our world. A few harmless jokes might not be so harmless over time. Betting that parlay on this weekend's games can make sports more about deriving monetary value for ourselves than the joy of the competition itself.

There is an old Cherokee wisdom story that goes something like this: A grandfather imparted a life lesson to his grandson. "There is a fight going on inside me, between two wolves," he told him. "One has darkness within it – anger, envy, resentment, greed, and arrogance. The other is filled with light – joy, peace, generosity, kindness, and humility.

"That same fight is going on inside you, my grandson. And inside the heart of every other person on the face of this earth."

The grandson, pondering this for a moment, looked at his grandfather with deep concern. "But grandfather, which one will win?"

The old man smiled and simply said, "whichever one you feed."

Jesus said, "Out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." Many attribute those things to human nature. Perhaps so. But those things can only thrive if we feed them. Instead, if we make our focus about more fully welcoming Christ into our lives and yielding our hearts to him, the life he imparts will grow and expand within us, diminishing the space for evil and sin to dwell.

Living this way isn't a chore. Though it takes some measure of discipline to attend to the needs of our hearts, those efforts pay off. Christ came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly. Are we finding joy in our faith, or is it just one more discipline we try to master, one more item on a list of unrealistic demands we place on ourselves? Faith isn't about acing the exam, winning the race, earning a gold star. It's about placing our trust in God and following the example of Christ. We won't get it right all the time. We'll lose our temper, speak in anger, act selfishly, miss the mark. But by God's grace, we get a new start, a chance to begin again, another opportunity to grow more closely into the likeness of Christ.

In this new year, let's resolve to grow more fully into the person God made each of us to be. But let's make sure that our resolutions go beyond the surface to the deeper things that are more lasting. Grow in compassion. Practice empathy. Stand in solidarity with those who need a friend or an advocate. Dedicate yourself to living the values our faith imparts. Let's all resolve to focus on our "heart health" – both our physical hearts and the ones that hold our deepest identity. Amen.

