

Hand-Washing

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Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, 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. 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." **Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

In a mass here this past Wednesday, we remembered St. Bartholomew, Apostle and martyr. Fr. Lawler offered the mass, and in his homily he recalled the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572. The massacre targeted Huguenots – the name widely used for French Protestants – and the slaughter actually went on for weeks, starting in Paris with the assassination of some high-ranking Huguenots, then spreading throughout France, by way of mob violence and the unchecked killings of tens of thousands of Huguenots by Catholics.

Father Lawler's mention of this struck a familial chord in me. I would not be standing here today were it not for Jacob Balliet, a prominent Huguenot ancestor. He escaped the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre and fled with his family to a province that was safer, for the time being. But periodic, renewed religious suppression and violence, for generations, later led two of Jacob Balliet's descendents, Paul and Joseph, to come to America. My grandfather on my mother's side immersed himself in this family history and valued passing it on to us. Brooke and I gave our son Owen the middle name of Balyeat.

The St. Bartholomew's Day massacre was only one particularly gruesome episode in the French Wars of Religion that lasted 36 years. And the annals of human history are strewn with dozens or hundreds of instances of religious persecutions, violence and genocide. Consider the Jewish Holocaust, the Armenian Genocide of the early 20th century, the religious atrocities of the 1990s Balkan Wars, or the present-day relentless oppression of Uyghur Muslims in China.

The gruesome suicide bombing at the airport in Kabul this past Thursday also has a place on this blood-soaked tapestry. Without over-simplifying, this and related violence partly arises from competing Muslim ideologies and allegiances. In any religion, or between any two religions or religious traditions, or in the crash zone between religion and state interests and power, competing claims about God's existence, God's nature, God's will and who God favors can escalate to extremes, with tragic and far-reaching outcomes.

Schism and trouble can, of course, erupt at a local level in any Christian congregation. I'm grateful to say that I've never seen bloodshed in a parish. But I have seen plenty of acute conflict. Christians behaving badly. Out-of-control destruction of relationships and mission. Some small originating issue blows up and metastasizes to other divisions, real and imagined, until character assassination and revenge, and worse, become the imperative outcomes. Things can quickly deteriorate in a religious context in part because what we ultimately believe, and how we ultimately understand God and ourselves is always implicit in every decision and relationship and encounter.

All of this comes to my mind this morning due to the scenario described in the gospel passage from Mark. It may seem innocuous enough at first; there's no apparent violence whatsoever. Some Pharisees and scribes notice that some disciples of Jesus were *eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them*. It was more than a question of hygiene. The stated concern was about a violation of religious purity codes associated with the Law of Moses. These rules of faith, as they were understood, had been refined and practiced for centuries.

Jesus responds to the Pharisees and scribes as Jesus often does. He draws distinctions between the letter of the law and the intention or spirit behind it. *You can forget your moralistic checklists about observable outward behaviors. These are not unimportant, but the holiness that God seeks arises from inside of you. You can't often, if ever, actually see true faith and holiness. "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come."* And it is from within, I might add, that true and holy intentions also come.

Whether those Pharisees and scribes heard it, the answer that Jesus gives them seems to include a buried accusation. Jesus knows that these religious leaders want to be *seen* as sincere and righteous. Why else would they be inquiring? Surely they are just wanting Jesus and his disciples to do the right thing – right?

Well, maybe. But Jesus knows that these purported ambassadors of God already have their eye on an end game that will not go well for him. Later in this gospel the pretenses will be dropped. The religious influencers with the most power will send some subordinates *"... to trap [Jesus] in what he said."* (12:13) For now, however, the purported authorities keep their ultimately violent intentions concealed behind an innocuous inquiry about washing hands.

With the benefit of hindsight, you and I may see an irony here. In the violent and bloody endgame for Jesus, the same consortium of religious authorities will 'wash their hands' of responsibility for the fate of Jesus, putting him in the hands of the Roman Empire. And on behalf of Rome, as related in the Gospel of Matthew, Pilate will literally wash his hands of responsibility for the sentencing and death of Jesus. *"... when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.'* Mt 27:24 24

The central conflict in the gospel of Mark begins with small matters, including a question of hand-washing, escalating step by step to religious violence, ultimately doing to Jesus what religious conflict and violence can do, and often has done, and often continues to do.

At the mass on Wednesday evening, Fr. Lawler ended his homily by saying that he sought to annually recall the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre on the day for which it was named and that he sought to do so, in part, as a mechanism for self-examination, to wonder about his own religious tolerance or intolerance. Fr. Lawler also, of course, invited our own self-examination.

It's harrowing to consider that Jesus was killed, in part, by well-intentioned religion, by a campaign that started small and grew out of control. It can be harrowing to catch glimpses of the sometimes-violent judgments about purity and impurity that lurk inside of us. It can be harrowing to inquire about the judgment and the excommunication of others, and worse, that can arise, or have arisen, in us. It can be harrowing to observe how and where and why we wash our hands. *Amen.*