

## **“A TRUE AND BLESSED WASHING”**

**Mk 7:1-13; Eph 5:22-33; Is 29:11-19**

Jesus doesn't want you to wash - He wants to wash you. And it isn't your hands He's worried about, it's your heart. Because it isn't those who are clean on the outside that are of the kingdom of God, but those who are clean on the inside.

And so, it was not the good, tidy, spotless, upright rich man who died and was taken to heaven, but the pitiable, dirty, outcast beggar Lazarus. It is not those who act righteous who make the angels in heaven rejoice, but the filthy, rotten sinner who repents. It is not the Pharisees who do all the right things that Jesus praises, but the poor, the lame, the blind, the crippled, the prostitute, the leper, the unclean, and the outcast - those who have no hope in this world; those who all they know to do is fall at Jesus' feet and say, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." And He does. Because Jesus came NOT to be served, but to serve you. He came not to tell you to wash and clean yourself up and make yourself respectable - He's come to wash you and create in you a clean heart. Because He's the only one who can. Do I have to clean myself up to come to Jesus? NO! Do you have to clean yourself up to take a bath?

The Pharisees that Jesus met in our Gospel didn't get that. Their focus was on what they were doing - on their own washing and work and the promises they made to God, instead of God's washing and work and His promises to them. And to the people, they looked holy. Back in the day parents would consider it a high honor to have their babies grow up to be Pharisees!

But what does Jesus say? "This people honor me with their lips" - with their outward words and deeds - "but their hearts are far from me." They rejected God's washing for them. God had already sent one to wash them and call them to repentance - John the Baptist - who preached repentance and baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Many listened and were washed, coming to John, acknowledging their sin, and receiving the washing of their hearts and the forgiveness of their sins. But not the Pharisees. That was beneath them. In their minds they needed no repentance, and they would refuse to humble themselves. If anyone was going to do the washing around here (they thought), it was them! But they couldn't. Nor can we. Because the washing we need is not on the outside—it's on the inside.

But how often we think like the Pharisees! It's what comes naturally to us in our fallen nature. We focus on what we do instead of what God does for us. We think that it's my promise to God that matters, not His promises to us. We think that if I can just do the right things, then I'll be better and more righteous. We think that if we can just pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps and clean ourselves off then we'll be clean. But it doesn't work. You might wind up looking good on the outside and may even be admired by many and may even be pleased with ourselves—but God, who sees the heart, is not impressed. Picture this: All he sees as he looks down upon us struggling to earn his love is acres and acres of rumps—people bent over trying to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. What a picture that is! And it just doesn't work! Sadly, many churches still today look teach their members to focus on their works—what

they do, rather than on what God does. For example, many look at Sunday morning at something they are doing for God—their weekly duty as they hope to win God’s favor with their presence in His house... when the reality is that in the service; God is primarily serving us—lavishing us with his grace in Gospel and Sacrament. That’s why we call it the Divine Service—the Divine One is servicing us! Baptism is another place where many get it wrong. They see it as something we do for God—our dedicating ourselves to Jesus, or “accepting His as our Savior,” not God reaching down to us. This morning God was acting, and Robert Tanner was the passive recipient of God’s gracious saving action. The Lord’s Supper is another example that is seen by many as something we do to remember Christ’s sacrifice, and yes, Jesus invites us to do this often in remembrance of Him, but more importantly, He is acting—delivering His forgiveness and life and salvation in this sacrament. How Pharisaical we can be when we make it about us! We turn a Gospel thing into a Law thing! We make it man’s work, not God’s work.

Later, Jesus will even call the Pharisees “whitewashed tombs”—meaning nice and clean and white on the outside, but dead and rotting on the inside.

Whitewashed tombs. That’s what we are, isn’t it? And no amount of outward washing, outward dressing, outward good deeds can change that. We still have a date with the undertaker.

But that’s why Jesus has come. To do for us what we can’t do for ourselves. To enter the tombs of hearts and lives filled with sin and death and wash them on the inside. To wash them with the only thing that can wash away that sin and death, and that is His blood. That is what St. Paul told us today in our Epistle. Listen again to his words (and please note that this reading isn’t about husbands and wives, but about you and Jesus) – “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved [His bride] the church [that’s you!] and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” Paul wrote those words about you... Because he wants you to know that...

- Jesus loves you - you who are not very lovable; you whose heart is dead and rotting and filled with the disgusting odor of sin. He wants you to know that...
- Jesus loves you - and so gave himself up to the death of the cross for your benefit; to sanctify you, to make you holy - which is an inner washing, not an outer one. He wants you to know that...
- Jesus loves you - and so shed His blood to cleanse your hearts; the cleansing we now receive through water and the word; through Holy Baptism which Robert Tanner received today making him a child of God and a fellow brother in Christ Jesus in this family of God. And St. Paul wants us to know that...
- Jesus loves you - and so died and rose from death, that you rise from death and from the death of sin; that he might present you to himself not in shame, but in splendor.

Not because you've done it, or done anything, in fact! But because He has. Because on the cross He became what you are - a dead and rotting corpse of sin under the sentence of death, that in His resurrection victory over our death - you might be who He is, a clean and holy child of God.

And you are! You are so raised! Because you are baptized. Washed with His blood. A dead sinner given a new life.

And you are so raised! Because you are forgiven—because this morning you didn't stand afar off like a Pharisee and extol your virtues, but fell at the feet of your Savior as hopeless, and helpless, and confessed yourself to be “a poor, miserable sinner who justly deserves temporal and eternal punishment” but you pleaded God's “boundless mercy” and the “holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death...of Jesus Christ” And the Lord had mercy. He says: “Here is my son, here is my daughter, here is my baptized child in whom I am well pleased. And He looks at us and sees not what we used to be but sees Jesus! His forgiveness was given to you. A gift that has no end. The tomb of your heart was washed in His blood. You were cleansed and raised again to a new life.

And you are so raised! Because you are the disciples who eat a meal which is for cleansing, and which gives not just life, but eternal life. Because this meal is the body and blood of the Clean One, given and poured into you to cleanse you and feed you and strengthen the new man and the new life given to you.

And so you are clean, not defiled. You are forgiven, not sinful. You are a child of God, not a slave to sin. And you are, because...

- He who is faithful has done it. (Not you.)
- He whose Word and promise cannot fail has done it. (Not you.)
- He, who has conquered sin and death, has done it. (Not you.)
- He has done it for you.

That you may live. That you may live, even now. Because God isn't just washing you for heaven, but that the eternal life He gives you begin now. His gift of eternal life doesn't have a “do not open until death” label on it but is yours to live now. That in all your callings in life - as a husband or wife, as a boss or worker, as a parent or child, as a student or teacher, as a friend or neighbor - you now live as a new person. A new and cleansed life from new and cleansed hearts. A life of love and faith and forgiveness. The life that Christ lived for you. And this not simply because you are following His example, but because Christ is now living in you... Motivating you... washing you... raising you... and giving you His love and forgiveness, that you might give the same to others.

And in the end, as Isaiah said in our Old Testament reading, we will see the wonderful work God has done... For us, in us, and through us. The work of the cross. The work of the cross which though it looks bloody and gory and anything but wonderful on the outside, is the wonderful cleansing work of Jesus for us. The cross, which though agonizing, is the wonder of wonders that shows the

love of God for you. The cross, from which the wonder of His forgiveness continues to flow. The forgiveness of red blood that washes black hearts as white and clean as snow.

So come, you who are defiled by sin. Come, and be washed. Come and be clean. In the Name of Jesus, Amen.