

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2021

Isaiah 29:11-19

Ephesians 5:22-33

Mark 7:1-13

I was out visiting folks in their homes last week. It was mid-afternoon and hot and I rang Luann Lutheran's doorbell. I was welcomed with a cheery smile and invited to sit at the kitchen table. Lutherans have an outstanding sense of hospitality and so Luann asked me if I might want a cool drink and refresh myself with some iced tea. "Oh," I said, "I could not think of anything nicer," and I thanked her for her kindness. "You're in luck," she said, "because I just washed the outside of this glass." I thought, "now that's a curious expression," but I just let it go. Then Luann put the glass on the table in front of me and went to fetch the tea from the refrigerator. Sure enough, the outside of the glass was clean and bright. But on the inside, encrusted at the bottom, was some whitish, moldy, science-project kind of material – I was guessing homebrew penicillin. And the smell! Then came the chipper announcement: "here we are, fresh brewed tea. Shall I fill it to the top?"

You're in luck, 'cause I just washed the outside of this glass. Oh, how delightful! Thanks! Have you ever considered washing the inside of the glass? Jesus said this: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and plate, that the outside also may be clean" (Matthew 23:25-26). Religious pretension gets you nowhere; religious pretension gets you less than nowhere but it seems to be some people's go-to in order to feel good about themselves. Do you know what makes a man unclean? Do you know what makes us the glass with the crusty mold on the inside? Sin. "From within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these things come from within, and they defile a person" (Mark 7:21-23). That passage has my picture next to it... am I'm not alone.

You have a problem. Not a minor blemish, this problem. How is this problem going to be corrected? C.S. Lewis wrote about conversion in a way that is helpful to us in understanding both our problem and how it's going to be resolved. Norm has just received the Gospel and he is delighted by it, and as a *response* to the wonder of God's truth, the beauty of God's grace in Christ extended to Norm, now humbled by God's love, Norm begins to clear out the garden of his soul. Mentone potatoes – have you heard of these? That's what we call the big rocks that lurk beneath the top few inches of soil around these parts. So, Norm starts clearing all the rubbish from his life. At first the work is easy. The spade is clearing all the unhappy habits from his garden. The swearing, the catcalls, kicking the dog, backstabbing his friends, cheating on his overtime sheet – Norm is making the garden of his soul a suitable place for God to dwell. The ugly Mentone potatoes are being evicted and he is working to his delight. Norm's spiritual muscles feel good and he begins to think that this Christian stuff is a snap. And then his shovel hits something that doesn't move. He goes to one side and then the other trying to find leverage – but it's enormous, unyielding – selfishness, pride, a pervasive lust and a judgmental heart – he can't clear it. Norm hit bedrock. Norm has got a problem in his soul that he can't fix.

You've got a problem. How are *you* going to correct it? The problem is that you are filthy on the inside. Washing the outside won't help. Religious games are played by those who refuse to address the inside or who think that they can solve their own problem. Here are a few examples.

My car is running kinda rough, so I think I'll take it to the detailer tomorrow. Actually, the oil light came on this week and that sort of alarmed me, until I put some black electrician's tape over the light – now I'm not so alarmed. At my physical this last week the doctor came in and said he had some bad news. "You've got lung cancer and the surgery will cost \$150,000." "Gee, Doc, that's a little steep. What can you do for \$25?" He said, "For \$25 I can touch up your x-rays." I smiled and immediately reached for my wallet. It sounds funny but games like these go on all the time in the spiritual arena. The Pharisees had the religion game down pat.

The Pharisees were baptizing everything in sight. Baptizing their cups and pots and copper vessels and even their dining couches. Yes, baptizing them. That is the word in the Greek – a ceremonial washing of everything... except themselves. St. Luke writes this about the crowds' reaction to Jesus' preaching: "When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him" (Luke 7: 29-30). You're in luck, because I just washed the outside of this glass. God has another plan. He doesn't use duct tape. He doesn't treat symptoms. He addresses the core issue, the heart of the problem. All this He does out of extraordinary love for you. Death and resurrection; that is His *modus operandi*. Divine blood and a new heart; that is the medium He employs and its effect. A continual application of grace, an ongoing feast of forgiveness – behold, I am making all things new!

The inside has to be washed! That's what *He* does. Inside we are all the same. Crusty with selfish pride, moldy with unholy appetites, corrupt, pus riddled, and debauched; that is fallen humanity; that is you (your fallen nature). And God washes us, on the inside. A new heart – that is what baptism generates. Think of it, the priceless Son of God, pure and holy and good and just and full of life – He allowed Himself to be soiled with the mold, the muck, and the refuse of your sin. It was heaped on Him – mine too, and the world's over – all on Him. Defiled, unholy, the embodiment of all evil as He hangs crucified on a cross – He bore it all and then suffered His Father's wrath against all of it. Flowing from His sacrificial flesh was blood – God's corrective for your soul. God then takes that atoning blood and He tucks it into the water of Holy Baptism. To wash you, on the inside. To cleanse you, to sanctify you, to make you as He is – pure, holy, just, good and full of life. His work, not yours. His grace, a free gift. His initiative, His love, His purpose – you *receive* it.

Would you leave this remarkable gift behind and prefer to tout your own fancy religious conquests? Would you ignore the gift of God's grace and focus on all that you do for God, all that you do to supposedly sanctify yourself, all that you do to prop up your warm self-regard? Hypocrites – they act all religious but they never defer to God's action, only talking about their own. Hypocrites – they only use God's Word as a stepping stone to talk about themselves, what holiness they have "achieved". Hypocrites – they honor God with their lips but their hearts are far from Him. The heart of a Pharisee lives in me. Self-righteous is the old man's middle name.

But here is the beautiful truth: Christ *died* for hypocrites like me. I have been baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection. What God makes new is me. What God makes new is you. His work prevails, not your sin. His resurrection defines us, not our hypocrisy. He creates in us a clean heart. He renews a right spirit within me, within you (Psalm 51:10-12). His supper is offered here anew and we feast on a banquet of marriage – Christ and His bride, the church. He delights in this union between us and Him. He washed us because He loves us and He desires to feed us with His righteousness, His holiness. **We honor Him by receiving what He wills to give.**

When we receive His supper, we honor Him; with more than our lips we honor Him. When we receive His body and blood we honor His cross, we honor His grace, we honor His Word, we honor His sacrifice, we honor His salvation, we honor His kingdom, we honor His resurrection, we honor His Father. It is a profound mystery – this grace, this washing, this new creation, this sacramental feast. His love animates it all and we are profoundly blessed. This is most certainly true.