

Mark 7:1-13

A germaphobe is someone who has a fear of germs. Germaphobes wash their hands many times through the day, and if they are not able to wash, they pull out their germ-X and use it. A germaphobe may be willing to shake your hand, but will use germ-X as soon as possible.

In our text for today, we meet a group of people (these are Pharisees) who we might think are germaphobes. They were always washing their hands. And not just their hands; they were washing their cups, and pots, and copper vessels, and dining couches -- everything associated with eating they would wash in a ritualistic manner before each meal. Extreme germaphobes? No. They did not even know of germs back in those days. Rather than being germaphobes, we could call them sinaphobes. They had a fear of sin; of sin entering them and defiling them.

If you were to eat something with hands that are unwashed and germy (and all of our germaphobes are shuddering at the thought), those germs on your hands would touch your lips, and through your mouth enter into you. The sinaphobes in our text believed that if they ate with unclean hands -- hands that were defiled -- their hands would touch their lips and they would become unclean on the inside.

Now it's not wrong to have certain phobias as long as our phobia does not master and control us. A healthy fear of germs can be a good thing, and having a fear of sin is essential. Someone who is not afraid to go and commit sin, plunging head-first into it, cannot be called a Christian, but is someone whom sin, and not Christ, has mastered.

In our text we see Jesus condemning the sinaphobes. He did not seek them out. They came to Him. They saw His disciples eating with hands that were unclean...unclean, that is, in their eyes, for they did not wash according to their laws and traditions. Jesus points out that seven centuries earlier, the Prophet Isaiah had spoken of these sinaphobes: "*This people honors (God) with their lips,*" he writes, "*but their heart is far from (Him).*" These sinaphobes cared more about their hands and their lips than about their hearts. And they cared more about their own laws and traditions than the laws and commandments of God. They were hypocrites. They put on a display of outward cleanliness, but within their hearts and minds they had no regard for God and His commandments.

You and I do the same thing if we come here into God's House pretending to love Him, but within our hearts and minds we have no desire to learn, receive His gifts, and continue, by His grace, in all of this. It doesn't matter how well we sing and pray with our lips, or how much we contribute with our hands -- both in giving and in serving -- if our heart is not right with God, we are today's hypocrites.

Those sinaphobes had it backwards. Sin does not enter the heart through unclean hands and lips. Sin dwells in the heart, and will show itself, from time to time, in how we use our lips and our hands. A liar is not someone who speaks lies with his lips. A liar is a liar within his heart, and now and then a lie from within his heart will escape through his lips. It's not our lips, or our hands, that are the problem; it's our heart. Those sinaphobes could have washed their hands twenty times each day, but never could they wash their own hearts.

And neither can we. But we saw the washing of an unclean heart take place this morning. John was brought to the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism where God has attached His promise to wash away our sins, making our heart right with God.

Pilate washed his hands after Jesus was condemned to die. He washed his hands of it all. But that did nothing, for God's promise was not in that water. The sinaphobes washed their hands carefully each day, yet they rejected the water of Baptism, and so they remained in their sin.

We have the tendency to judge our sinfulness by the stains on our lips and on our hands. We judge others in the same manner. But God looks at the heart. What does He see? Friend, He sees a heart that is washed clean. For all of you who, like John, have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ. "*The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.*" Jesus' promise is certain. He attached Himself to the water of Baptism for you. He is in that water. And now He is in you. You are right with God through Christ. He is the One who has cleansed you. We still see the sinful stains on our lips and hands, but God sees Christ in your heart.

So many people today are what we could call Godaphobes. They are afraid of God. They don't have a healthy fear and respect for Him; they are terrified of Him. They are aware of the sin in their lives. They know God punishes sin. They are afraid to die; afraid of what God will say to them in the Judgment.

These Godaphobes act like the sinaphobes in our text. They live by their own laws. They give an outward appearance of godliness. But within their hearts they are pricked in their conscience and are very much afraid of God.

Even those who are baptized can be Godaphobes. Do you think the prodigal son wasn't at all afraid when he was returning to his father? He was deathly afraid. So he came back with a peace offering. "Treat me as a servant, father," he said, "and not as your son." But his father wouldn't hear of it. He had completely forgiven him from his heart.

There is nothing you and I can do to make things right with God. That's because Jesus has already done everything. God punished Him on the cross for your sin and mine. Jesus is the peace offering that God accepts on your behalf.

You are baptized into Christ. This means for you that God is never angry at you, but you are always His dear child. Do we sometimes fall into sin? Yes, even daily. God never turns away from you, but like the prodigal's father, He is always seeking you in love; always calling for you to return; always embracing you with forgiving arms. Your lips and hands are not defiled, no matter how you have used them in the past. In the Sacrament on the altar, Jesus touches your lips, and you are clean throughout. Your heart is not rejected by God, no matter how many secret sins have lived there. Your baptism into Christ creates a clean heart within you each and every day.

It's okay if you are a germaphobe, but never a Godaphobe. He loves you. He forgives you in Christ. You are His precious child. You are clean in His eyes because of Jesus. Amen.