

### WHAT IS INSIDE YOU?

- My Mom was a cleanliness freak – Her house was immaculate. She was always saying “Did you wash your hands?” when I was growing up.
- This is the same woman who would take my laundry that I thought was clean and do it over again when I came home from school. I would say: “Mom, those are clean.” She would say “you call this clean?”
- She would say the same thing about our hands as kids. “You call that clean? Wash ‘em again!”
- To this day, I wash my hands a lot. And I’m actually glad of it now.
- Because this is something recommended by doctors – especially during the cold and flu season.
- Why do they recommend it? Because of germs.
- We wash our hands and food and dishes as a matter of good hygiene.
- Why, then, did Jesus’ disciples eat with dirty hands? Didn’t their mothers teach them any manners?
- Well, the truth is that in ancient times, people had no idea about germs.
- It was only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 1800s that scientists developed the germ theory of disease – less than 150 years ago. Doctors began to realize that certain bacteria are the origin of illness. A little later, scientists discovered viruses which complicated matters but led to even greater understanding of the causes of diseases.
- Before then, terrible illnesses like cholera and yellow fever were commonly thought to come from something in the air – “miasmas,” they were called. There were also other theories that we consider ridiculous today.
- So eating with dirty hands was probably pretty common in Jesus’ time.
- However, observant Jews often had clean hands when they ate because they were into ritual cleansing. Ritual washing of hands, body, and dishes, etc.
- This is what the gospel of today is all about. The scribes and Pharisees (the religious leaders of the day) were criticizing some of Jesus’ disciples for not observing ritual purity. This had nothing to do with hygiene; it was purely ceremonial.
- Jesus comes back at the Scribes and Pharisees strongly – even though he probably usually observed this ritual purity himself because he was a good Jew. He came back at them because of their hypocrisy (They were not sincere; they were actors – they were putting on a show.)
- And He came back at them because of their misplaced priorities. They obsessed about not washing hands which they said was a terrible sin that rendered a person defiled and impure, but they too easily overlooked much bigger sins.
- Jesus points out that these religious leaders ought to be more concerned about what really defiles people – including Pharisees and scribes – namely the vices firmly rooted in our hearts.
- What really defiles a person is what comes from his or her insides and not what comes into them from the outside.

- This was a radical and revolutionary statement that Jesus made because no really observant Jew (in Jesus' time or today) would ever risk ritual impurity.
- But Jesus was making the point that it's our attitude that is more important than empty religious observance.
- For us today, this message of Jesus can serve to remind us that we need to pay attention not only to our religious observances or practices (e.g. Mass, prayers) but perhaps we might need to pay even more attention to what's in our hearts -- to pay attention more to the internal than to our external ways of being practicing Catholics.
- Let's look at this list of evils in the heart that defile us – as Jesus lists them in today's Gospel (from Mark): evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly.
- I see some things on this list that have defiled me. What about you?
- What about our time? What from this list is especially relevant to our culture?
- Jesus mentions malice and evil thoughts. We live in a time of a lot of rage that people have and a lot of resentment and ill feeling toward one another. There is a lot of lack of respect. Look at what happens at home where we hurt the ones we love. Look at what happens on the highway – with road rage. This malice poisons our hearts.
- Look at what happens in our political discourse over issues like Health Care. There is such lack of tolerance. One of the most interesting political friendships in our nation has been the friendship between Senator Ted Kennedy and Senator Orrin Hatch – and Kennedy's death has underscored this bond. Here are two men who have almost completely opposing political viewpoints; but they not only respected each other, they loved each other as brothers. It is said that Hatch, a Mormon, helped Kennedy, a Catholic, to overcome some of his personal failings. Wouldn't it be a blessing if more of our public servants were like these two? God knows, we need more civility in our politics and less of the venom that comes from deep inside.
- Then there are also the divisions in the church. There is too much suspicion and backbiting and accusations in the church today. People are too quick to say someone is not a good Catholic. Most folks don't know enough to say that someone else is not a good Catholic. So why say it? Leave judgment to God! None of us, even if we try, could ever approach judgment with the right amount of mercy needed to judge anyone else – or probably even to judge ourselves.
- Jesus also speaks in the Gospel today of unchastity and adultery. We live in a society drenched in sex. Pornography is readily available in the media and especially (now more than ever) on the internet. This obsession with sex ruins lives and damages marriages and families.
- Jesus brings up greed and envy. Our American culture fosters the attitude that we can never have enough. Advertising and marketing have gotten out of control in our world. They make us feel like dirt unless we have all the latest of everything. This message of needing to have everything is spoiling our kids. The evil of naked greed that Jesus mentions today and that comes from inside plunged our society into a terrible recession.
- So there is plenty in our hearts to worry about; but, just as in Jesus' day, we in America today tend to worry more about externals than internals. We can think we are ok if we practice our religion by coming to Mass and saying our prayers while our hearts are full of anger and hatred and condemnation and greed and lust.

- I am reminded of the story of the good Muslim who was running after an enemy to kill him with a knife. Just then, a horn sounded signaling the time for prayer. Like every good Muslim is bound to do, this guy whipped out his prayer rug which he had on him and knelt down in worship. Then he got up and continued his murderous pursuit. Don't we Catholics do something only too similar when we leave Mass to gossip about and tear down a neighbor or kill their good name?
- Look at the venom that comes from inside us sometimes in condemnation of those who disagree with us. It reminds me of the scribes and Pharisees.
- Our hearts will change only when we begin truly to care about others – especially the poor and the sick and those in need – but also the imperfect and the mistake-prone and the sinners (who are, after all, a lot like ourselves).
- Sometimes we hear of movements to display more Christian or so-called “Judeo-Christian” symbols (like the Ten Commandments) in public places. But these are externals. I believe that, even if we had the Ten Commandments on every street corner, it wouldn't make much difference in our goodness as a people. In light of today's gospel message, let's work on what's inside us. Only when we stop worshipping money, power and sex in this country will we be a better nation.
- We will be a more Christian country only when Christians start being more Christian.
- And more people will want to be Catholic only when we Catholics live our faith more authentically.
- God will help us to change our hearts so that our lives will not be defiled by what comes from our insides.
- Jesus gave us the example of the truly observant religious person: He was not an actor (not a hypocrite). He said his prayers and practiced his faith outwardly as well as inwardly.
- May he guide us to have pure hearts and to live undefiled lives!