

“Dirty Hands”

Ash Wednesday

Psalm 24:3-6

February 17, 2010

When I was a child I always had dirty hands. Dirty from playing baseball, or from climbing trees, or from touching everything I saw and was close too. At the end of the day my hands were so dirty. Every time I came in from playing outside I had to wash my hands. If I didn't I would get dirty everything I touched. It didn't take too long before I learned that when my hands are dirty there was not a whole lot I could do inside. No one wanted to touch me or be touched by me, nor could I touch anything else.

Dirty hands are not very useful. They become a problem. And in the psalm for tonight dirty hands represent a spiritual problem. The writer of the Psalm asks, “How do we come into the presence of God?” He answers his own question by saying we can only come into God's presence having a pure heart and clean hands. His reference isn't just to the fact of using soap and water to clean our hands, but that our actions – the things we do in our life – reflect our relationship with God. The writer's concern is that our actions be in keeping with God's will and purpose, that our heart – the inner person – would reflect our relationship with God. His hope would be that with heart and hand, we would give testimony to everyone that we are people of God.

However, if God were to say “Don't touch, go and wash your hands, that we are soiled, and that we have dirty hands God would be justified in doing so. God would be justified to exclude us. To be in God's presence we must be clean. And we are anything but clean! Our actions are not in keeping with God's will. Our lives, even down to the core of our hearts, do not reflect the kind of relationship that we should have with our God. Instead, they reflect that we are sinful and unclean. Our hands reveal where we have been- amid the muck and the mire of this world.

A close look at our hands reveals a lot about us. We see beneath our finger nails the grime and dirt of scratching our way through life, trying to get ahead, sometimes at the expense of others. We can see the bruises from when we have swung our hand at each other without concern for who they are or what their needs may be. These bruises reflect the misuse of our hands even as we reflect the will, purpose, and the love of God. Our hands say, “We are dirty”, and we are. We are in no way fit or equipped to come into God's presence. God is holy and perfect. God does not tolerate that which is unholy. God cannot accept the dirt and filth that is so evident on the hands of each of us. The dirt is there. We may have to look closely, but it's there. Whether the world sees it or not, it is there!

In the play by William Shakespeare called “Macbeth”, in the 5th and final act, two actors standing in the shadows, waiting for lady Macbeth to appear. Lady Macbeth enters the scene, walking in her sleep, carrying a candle. The one character says to the other, “She comes every night to scrub her hands.” Very quickly she begins to scrub her hands and she says “Oh, spot, be gone! Oh, damned spot, be gone! Be gone, oh, spot! I can smell blood! Not even all the perfume of Arabia could carpe' away the smell of blood.”

Lady Macbeth is reflecting the terrible guilt that exists in her. Shakespeare touches the true nature of the human heart in demonstrating in her that tremendous guilt that she bore because of the murder in which she had been involved. The audience cannot see the blood on her hands. But she can!

Our guilt condemns us. The world may not see the spots, but we do. We see the grime and the dirt, the ground-in soil of all the wrong doings, the transgressions against God and that which we work against each other.

We know our condition and yet the psalmist tells us that whoever has clean hands and a pure heart may approach God. So where does that leave us? If we admit that our hands are soiled and that there is no cleanliness there, where does that leave us?

It is the message of Lent, it is the message of Good Friday, and it is the message of Easter that is in Jesus Christ, God seemingly contradicts himself. Our God who says that no one may enter into his presence with soiled hands, is the same God who extends his hand to you and to me and says, "Come unto me, you who labor and are heavy laden, come unto me all of you that have dirty hands, and I will give you rest."

God invites us, not because God overlooks our dirty hands, but because the dirt has been washed away in the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus' blood removes the dirt, the grime, the filth of our existence, and presents us before God with clean hands and a pure heart.

The cry of this Lenten season is for you and for me, recognizing the condition of our hands, to come clean, to come dropping all the pretenses of our existence. We are asked to offer up our hands to the Lord and say, "Lord I see that, in fact, my hands are soiled."

We extend our hands, dirty from sin, to be washed in the blood of our savior. We extend our hands, dirtied from life, that they may catch a drop of the purifying blood poured from the wounded hands of Jesus. We extend our hands, dirty, soiled, and we receive them back clean, washed in the blood of the lamb.

We are now able to come into the presence of God. For we come, through the blood of our savior, as people who have been given pure hearts and clean hands.

AMEN