

Clean-handed worship. Even churches are getting into the hand-washing act. In highly-liturgical traditions, dipping one's fingers into the holy-water font has long been required upon entering the sanctuary as a reminder of one's baptism. Now, a brief stop at the antibacterial hand-wash dispenser in the narthex is becoming part of many worshipers' Sunday-morning routine.

While all this may sound like something new - a consequence of our heightened awareness of contagious diseases - hand-washing before worship is actually an ancient practice. God was asking the same question, long before mom was: *Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?* asks the author of Psalm 24. Only *those who have clean hands and pure hearts*.

The Lord's hill, of course, is Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the location of the temple. It is holy because the Lord chose it to be so - as the Lord is entitled to do, being the sole proprietor of heaven and earth (v. 1).

This proprietor insists on cleanliness for all who enter the temple courts - but not just ordinary, physical cleanliness. The Hebrew word, *naqi* (which we translate as "clean"), literally means "innocent" or "unmarried" - even "virginal." It's relatively uncommon in the Old Testament; other words are more frequently used to denote ordinary, physical cleanliness - particularly the cleanliness rituals of the law of Moses - but the psalmist was more interested in moral cleanliness ("a pure heart").

Many Christian worship traditions include a confession of sin in the early part of the service, which is an act of spiritual hand-washing. When approached soberly and seriously, such a prayer is an act of spiritual purification - the last vestige, for many of us, of the ancient purification rituals the psalmist knew so well.

Pure-hearted worship. The apostle Paul picks up a similar theme as he advises the Corinthians to avoid approaching the Lord's Table "unworthily" (1 Cor. 11:29). This is the verse that spawned the use of communion tokens for Reformed worshipers in Colonial America. Worshipers were not welcomed at the Lord's Table until they had first obtained a bronze or lead token - like a small coin - that served as their admission ticket to the sacrament. Communion tokens were handed out at the close of a lengthy service of preparation, typically held on the Friday evening before Communion Sunday. This service usually included a call to repentance and a call to recommit one's life to God's Will. Only after repenting of sins and

rededicating one's life to God, only after receiving a pure heart, could the worshiper approach the Lord's Table.

What does it mean to seek purity of heart? Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard said it is "to will one thing": to achieve communion, however fleeting, with the divine. It's an incredibly difficult task in our frantic, face-paced world. The chime of an incoming e-mail, the tyranny of a to-do list blaring its urgency, the obsessive desire to check back on Facebook to see how many "likes" we've garnered, are all enemies of spiritual centeredness. Pure-hearted worship strives to will one thing: praise of the Almighty.

Right worship. The next lines of the psalm shift the focus to another aspect of moral purity. Those who are able to stand with confidence and integrity in God's holy place, without being blasted to the ground by the divine glory, are those *who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully* (v. 4).

Literally, the Hebrew means "who do not lift up their souls to emptiness (*shav*)." It's a word used elsewhere to refer to the worship of idols, with the implication that idolatry offers only illusory and deceptive rewards.

This concept calls to mind Isaiah's brilliant satire of the idol-maker (Ch. 44) who cuts a block of wood in two, tossing half of it into the fire to warm himself, then carving the other half into a god before whom he bows down. *They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand.* Such a deluded worshiper *feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?'* (44:16-20).

Surely there are abundant examples of idolatrous worship, of people in our hedonistic culture "lifting up their souls to emptiness." So many of the golden prizes adored by those who frantically seek to achieve their own salvation - money and fame being notable examples - are, in fact, emptiness. The name of the television show *American Idol* is more truthful than its creators know.

Right worship is not like that. Right worship is truthful to its core, and single-minded in its devotion to the one true God.

The benefits of "clean hands". Those who approach the holy places with clean hands and pure hearts, those who worship with integrity, are promised a remarkable benefit. They will receive God's blessing (*berakah*) and vindication (*sedeqah*). What must they do to receive such rewards? They need only *seek the face of the God of Jacob*.

Which may be easier said than done. Seeking God's face is a singularly bold enterprise, according to the Old Testament. Not even Moses is permitted to view the glorious countenance of the Almighty. In Exodus 33:18-23, this venerable prophet and leader of God's people, this man who is God's own messenger, is allowed - from the protective shelter of a cleft in the rock - only the most fleeting glimpse of divine glory, as God passes by. This is because, as the Lord graciously warns him, *no one shall see me and live*.

But that doesn't stop these earnest worshipers from trying. Still they yearn to look upon God's face. They seek the very blessing that not even Moses was permitted to receive. Granted, the psalmist never promises them they will succeed in their quest, although he does seem convinced they will never cease their efforts to do so.

Jesus makes an even bolder promise in the beatitudes: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God* (Mt. 5:8). Cleanliness and purity obviously have a great deal to do with it. Of all the blessed believers Jesus mentions, only the pure in heart are granted a vision of the Almighty.

And who are these pure in heart of whom Jesus speaks? He doesn't say. It doesn't seem, though, to have the least bit to do with antibacterial gel, nor indeed, with anything else we can do to justify ourselves by our own efforts.

It has everything to do with who Jesus is and what he does for us. Our hands are not clean, but he makes them clean. Our hearts are not pure, but he washes them. Our attention wanders, but with infinite gentleness he calls us back.

As we approach Our Lord's Table today, let's come clean. It is Jesus whom we seek. And, by sheer grace, we are bold to claim that we will one day see him face to face - with clean hands and a pure heart.

Coming Clean

Sunday, July 5, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Psalm 24

To "come clean" is another way of saying to "fess up," or to tell all. Coming clean is a way of taking ownership or responsibility for one's misdeeds. One hopes that there are not too many times when it is necessary to "come clean." Why live in such a way in which you're always having to fess up?

But when many of us were kids, "coming clean" was a common occurrence. A version of it happened just before arriving at the supper table: "Did you wash your hands?" mom asked. As kids, many of us heard that question all the time. It detoured us to the sink, on our way to dinner. We were, in a real sense, "coming clean."

It's an even more important question today, living, as we do, in this overcrowded, disease-ridden world. Public health experts are forever teaching that one of the best disease-prevention techniques is also the simplest: the very one mom insisted on. Good old soap and water does the trick, as long as we devote proper time and attention to the task.

One guideline suggests we ought to take as much time washing our hands as it takes to recite the 23rd psalm. The 30 seconds or so it takes to say that psalm at an ordinary conversational pace, is about the time many health experts recommend for a pre-meal hand-washing. And it's a bonus for Christians: The psalm/hand washing technique also counts as a devotional moment!

Quite apart from keeping ourselves healthy, hand-washing keeps others healthy as well. We live in an interconnected world where no one of us is an island - certainly, bacteria and viruses don't behave as though we are. Our hands are a principal means of sharing our "bugs" with others, even though we don't intend to do so.