

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

James 4:7-12

Cleansed Hands and Purified Hearts

I warned you when we started all this that James was not going to pull any punches. The sinful nature doesn't need a few love taps; it needs a knock out punch. The flesh doesn't need to be dunked; it needs to be drowned. We're either submitted to God and humbled before Him or submissive to sin and exalted by pride. We come before God as the humbled or the hypocrite, the tax collector or the Pharisee, the acted upon or the actor, the beggar or the braggart.

"Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double minded." James is hardly an original thinker. In fact, his entire epistle is for the most part pious plagiarism, reverent repristination. David long ago beat him to the punch in Psalm 24, *"Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart..."*

But isn't this the same David who wrote, in a seemingly contradictory fashion in Psalm 51, *"Surely I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."* Was David thus unable to ascend the hill of the Lord? He most certainly was in the pride and stubbornness of sin. He too had to be to be humbled, for example, by the prophet Nathan, an Old Testament James, after stealing another man's wife and seemingly getting away with it.

But David continues, *"Create in me a pure heart, O God."* Clean hands and pure hearts are cleansed hands and purified hearts. James and David likely have the same picture in mind. Moses writes in Exodus:

The LORD said to Moses, "You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet. When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the LORD, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute forever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations." (30:17-21)

Aaron and his sons couldn't approach the Lord's altar without being cleansed. Neither can we. We will not be cleansed without a word from the Lord and His water. Old Testament priests passed the basin on the way to the altar; New Testament priests pass the font on the way to the same. The house of God is no pigsty, so we must leave our filth to join His feast.

But, *"the dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire,"* St. Peter warns (2 Peter 2:22). And not only the so-called chauvinists here are pigs; we've all had a little too much fun in the mud. *"Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion,"* Solomon observes. Like a woman without discretion, we also have too often and too easily turned the gospel into a jewel in a hog's snout, adorning our sin with the feigned sanction of God's grace. But the James would rip such false comfort out of our turned up noses today and drive us to the hoses for a much needed bath.

But, as I mentioned before, James is hardly an original thinker. He is merely echoing Jesus' own words. Hear the second half of the Holy Gospel appointed for our ears today:

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

James is not a malicious assailant seeking to do us harm with his words. He is a doctor of souls, carefully applying what he had learned in the divine medical school of His Savior.

A while back, Nicholas stormed out of the house, arms crossed, feet stomping. Pastor Peil stopped him and asked what was wrong. "My mommy said a mean word to me," he complained "What did she say?" Pastor Peil asked. The reply? "She said, 'No.'"

Jesus says, "No." James says, "No." Our flesh cries, "He said a mean word," mistaking blunt words for unloving words. But sometimes the most loving, the most necessary words are the bluntest. We tell the doctor, "Just tell me what it is"? And Jesus and James are diagnosing a problem: our inclination to return to our vomit, to go back to wallowing in the mud. "*If it tempts you, cut it out of your life,*" Jesus says. "*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you,*" James exhorts. A novel concept indeed, is it not?

What keeps dragging you back into the mud? What keeps enticing you back to your vomit, that is, the mess you've in the sickness of sin coughed up in the past? Don't try to manage it. Don't try to overcome it. Don't try to outwit it. Don't try to see how close you can get to it. Get away from it. Resist the devil. Cut off temptation. It's mud, it's vomit, not a work of art, that you should stare and ponder with glee.

So now what do we do, all mud and vomit as we are? Do what a priest does: wash again in the Lord's basin. And isn't that, after all, just what God's ambassador urges you to do every time you prepare to approach the altar. "Beloved in the Lord, let us draw near with a pure heart and confess our sins to God our Father, asking him in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to grant us forgiveness." The basin stands before the altar for a reason, for the same David says in the same Psalm in which he declares his sinfulness, "*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*"

A dog trainer on a website I recently read wrote that, in order to train old dogs, you have to break them first. That is what James is doing: breaking old dogs so God can train them, and he's had four weeks. How's he done? I pray you are broken, because God makes the broken whole. God must humble the sinner to exalt a saint. And God has exalted you, lifting you up in His Son, wrapped in your flesh, that by the water and blood issuing forth from His pierced and most blessed side you might be cleansed and purified. And you are cleansed and purified. You've been to the basin.

God has drawn near to you, just as He has called you to draw near to Him. Now draw near and take the Body of the Lord, and be sent forth with God's blessing, with freshly cleansed hands and purified hearts. And I know it sounds obvious, but remember: stay out of the mud, and stop going back to the vomit. Mud and vomit are for pigs and dogs, not God's children. The gospel is not a jewel in the snout of a hog; it is a crown on the baptized heads of Christ's jewels. "*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*" Amen.