

The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

## Dirty Shoes and Clean Hearts \*

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Recently I saw the film “Crazy Rich Asians,” which has been at the top of the box office charts for two weeks in a row. A lot of my friends have been, well, *crazy* about that romantic comedy. And, to be honest, I loved it too.

The movie is about Rachel, a Chinese American economics professor from New York City. She discovers, on a trip to Asia, that her Asian boyfriend, Nick, is actually the heir to one of the wealthiest families in Singapore. And it turns out that most of Nick’s family and friends hate Rachel because they believe, wrongly, that she is dating Nick for his money.

As an Asian American, I thought that the movie was refreshing, with its cast of all-Asian actors, and how it portrayed people of Asian descent as three-dimensional characters. To be sure, the movie glosses over some important issues of class and economic inequality. But it was a nice change of pace, for example, to see Asian men as attractive romantic leads instead of just clownish buffoons or exotic Kung Fu masters.

There was one scene in the movie, however, that struck me as not being very realistic. Rachel visits Nick’s grandmother’s home in Singapore to make dumplings. The movie showed Rachel wearing her street shoes inside the house. Now if you know anything about Asian cultures, you know that you *never, ever* wear shoes inside of somebody’s house. Especially if you are a guest. To do otherwise is, well, just shocking.

Maybe it’s because I was raised in a fairly traditional Asian American home, but, to me, something just feels wrong about wearing shoes inside of a house. It just isn’t done. It’s dirty.

Today’s gospel passage from Mark describes a similar reaction by certain religious leaders – Pharisees and scribes – who were shocked by the unclean behavior of Jesus’ disciples. They observed the disciples eating with “defiled hands” (that is, without washing them), and they were horrified by this violation of the ritual purity laws. That kind of thing just wasn’t done. It was dirty.

The religious leaders accused Jesus’ disciples of not following the “tradition of the elders.” Jesus reacts very strongly when he hears this. He responds by calling them hypocrites. He quotes the prophet Isaiah, who said that the ancient Israelites honored God with their lips, but their hearts were actually far away.

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Jesus reminds the religious leaders that what is ultimately important is not so much what's on the outside of a person, but rather what's inside. "Listen to me, all of you, and understand," Jesus says. "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." In other words, evil arises not from dirt on the hands, but from inside the human heart. Things like greed, infidelity, or pride come from within. That's what truly defiles a person – not dirt on the outside.

Jesus' teaching in today's gospel passage reminds us that there is a deeper meaning behind ritual purity practices like hand washing. Of course, the washing of one's hands before a sacred meal is important. And modern science has taught us that there may be good health-related reasons for doing so. But we must also remember that the deeper meaning of ritual washing is the cleansing of ourselves on the inside as well as on the outside.

Similarly, taking off one's shoes before entering a house is important. But the deeper meaning of that practice is about honoring the boundary between the home and the outside world. It is about respecting the sacredness of the home space, especially if you are a guest. It's easy to be so fixated on the actual practice of taking off one's shoes – like I was with the scene from "Crazy Rich Asians" – that one forgets the deeper meaning behind the rule.

Ritual purity is not limited to first-century Israelite religious practices. In fact, we practice it here, at the Little Church, at every mass. If you look closely at what is happening during the offertory hymn, you will see that the celebrant washes his or her hands after censing the altar and before saying the eucharistic prayer. The acolyte pours the water over the priest's hands, as the priest quietly says a prayer from Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

Ironically, this hand-washing ritual is not really about washing hands. Rather, it's a reminder for the celebrant to have the right intention – that is, a clean heart and a right spirit – before saying the eucharistic prayer. It is a reminder of Jesus' teaching that what defiles a person is not on the outside, but is from the inside.

We Anglo-Catholics are especially prone to mistaking the ritual itself for the deeper meaning behind the ritual. There is a common species in Anglo-Catholic parishes called the liturgy queen. Liturgy queens are known for their powerful sense of observation and sharp tongue, and they strike terror in the hearts of priests everywhere. (It's OK, you can laugh. It's a joke.) I know this, because I could easily see myself drifting in that direction if I'm not careful. I might not know the first thing about football, but I can give you a play-by-play commentary on every bow, genuflection, and sign of the cross made during a two-hour solemn high mass.

Joking aside, ritualism can easily go too far. Liturgy is never done for its own sake. We do liturgy because it reflects what we believe. Liturgy reflects the beauty and the order of God's creation. It connects us with our ancestors in the faith. And it reminds us of the incarnation and the Word made flesh. That is, good liturgy invokes all five of our bodily senses: the sight of the vestments; the smell of the incense; the sound of sacred music; the touch of the peace; and the taste of the Body and Blood of Christ. Much of this liturgical sensibility was on display

yesterday at the powerful and moving funeral service for Senator John McCain at the National Cathedral of the Episcopal Church.

Earlier this year, I attended an interfaith breakfast for clergy and religious leaders in New York City. The Reverend Al Sharpton was the closing speaker, and I still remember quite vividly what he said. Many of us, Reverend Al said, have clean hands and dirty hearts. That is, although we talk a good talk, we have clean hands because all too often we sit on the sidelines. We rarely roll up our sleeves and feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, or visit the imprisoned. And we have dirty hearts because we often think more about ourselves than we do about God and neighbor. And so we have clean hands and dirty hearts.

What we really need, Reverend Al said, is the exact opposite of that. We need more *dirty* hands and *clean* hearts. We need people who aren't afraid of rolling up their sleeves and getting their hands dirty. And we need people who think more often about God and neighbor than themselves – and so have clean hearts.

Dirty hands and clean hearts. Or, in Asian American terms, dirty shoes and clean hearts. That, in a nutshell, is Jesus' teaching in today's gospel.

Thinking back to “Crazy Rich Asians,” maybe that scene with Rachel and her shoes wasn't a mistake. Maybe Rachel was *supposed* to be wearing shoes in that Singaporean home. Maybe Rachel's role in that scene was to shake up Nick's family and their traditions with her dirty shoes and her clean heart. That's what Jesus' disciples did, after all.

“Listen to me, all of you, and understand,” Jesus says. “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”