

Congregational Church of La Jolla
Rev. Tim Seery
March 8, 2020

Would you pray with me?

Gracious God,
May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be found acceptable in your sight. Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Deeper into Lent we go. Deeper into this strange time of reflection and preparing for the height of the Christian calendar year with Maundy Thursday and Easter on the horizon. Some of you maybe have a Lenten practice that you are observing. There's the classic health related practices, right, cutting back on sugar, giving up soda, going to the gym every day, then there's the spiritual ones, many of my colleagues are doing this because the new hip Lenten disciplines include practicing what is called a digital detox, whereby one significantly limits the amount of 24 hour news they consume or the amount of time they spend reading or engaged in toxic social media political rants with their brother-in-law's neighbor or that one guy they met at a wedding once five years ago. Now all of these are well and good and valid practices. I endorse them.

But as I was seeing colleagues and friends tell of what Lenten practices they were encouraging their congregations to take up, I had an idea. Now I didn't see this anywhere but if some of you have you can let me know because I'm sure this had to have been thought of a million times over this past week.

But I was thinking that if we wanted to be really contemporary, really timely, really hip, leaning in to where we are as a society in March of 2020 somebody should say that this year we can bring back the chocolate cake and the sweets but that mindful and sustained hand washing could be our Lenten practice—which is oh so timely. Now, I do have a theological backing for this. On Maundy Thursday, at the end of Lent, it's common for some churches to enact a foot washing ritual where Jesus' washing of the Disciples' feet is reenacted and remembered, reminding us that we are each called to wash the feet of humanity. Now not all churches do this, we don't do it here... but yet it is still something that is very common during the end of Lent. We remember Jesus' washing of the disciples feet and we reflect on what that means in our faith.

Yet here in 2020 contemporary problems demand contemporary solutions, we can front load and modify it a little bit. (we don't have to wait til Maundy Thursday) to pull

out this foot washing theology and we can modify it by moving from feet to hands, encouraging folks to practice mindful and thorough hand washing. One of the tag lines we use in this denomination is that our faith is 2000 years old but our thinking is not. This is certainly an example of that.

Ok so here is what got me thinking about all of this. So I'm in the bathroom of Nordstroms at the Fashion Valley mall and it was relatively busy and I noticed that while everyone is very well trained to enact the ritual of going to the sink to wash their hands, what they actually do when they get to the sink is more like a hand christening than anything that appears like legitimate washing. Almost as if a lot of us are so focused on the rote memory of it all that we don't actually remember or pay attention to what we are actually doing. It was splash some water, and go. I mean they might as well have just bypassed the sink all together. And this troubled me. Because if the future of public health is dependent on this simple hygienic act, and if the gentlemen of Wednesday at 6 pm of the Nordstroms bathroom are in any way a sample size reflective of the wider population, then I thought, well, we're in trouble

Lent is a journey through the desert. And the desert is a place of uncertainty. And as I mentioned last week we find ourselves in all sorts of deserts all the time. Both personal, and communal. Sometimes even deserts of our own making. And some others that we've happened to wander into on accident. Right now our society is finding itself with many points of uncertainty before it. We are in a time of political uncertainty, a season of slightly more economic volatility, and as our world confronts yet another public health crisis with coronavirus. We are all, all who are alive at this moment in history, entering a desert of sorts. Yes, it is a desert we will make it through. Yes we will be ok. Yes we are fine. But there is no doubt uncertainty and discomfort that we will face together in the coming weeks, and months, as we pass through this time and as some parts of life are disrupted by it all.

As we find ourselves in this time where we reflect on this walk we take through the dessert why not find, I thought, a way to practice such reflection in a way that responds to the contemporary challenges of our day. I saw a very clever tool that was shared on Facebook where they posted above sinks in public restrooms with the choruses of famous songs that you can sing in your head while you wash your hands. And each of these choruses is like 30 seconds long, which is the suggested hand washing time. Which, I might add is about 10 times longer than what I've been seeing in public restrooms...

But this is indeed a clever tool. But I want to take it a step further. What if we spent the 30 or so seconds we are supposed to be washing our hands by actually looking at

them, looking at their shape, at their color, at the callouses on them, at the rough parts, the soft parts and giving thanks to God for the things we've been able to do with our hands. For the places our hands have been and the miracles that we've participated in because of them. For each of us with different careers and life paths, our hands have done different things. Where have your hands taken you? Have you ever asked that question? Our hands do such interesting things. For the musicians among us, there's the music that our hands have made, for the writers there's the words our hands have written, for the engineers the problems our hands have solved, for the artists the art our hands have produced, for the doctors and dentists and physical therapists and nurses the people our hands have healed, for the parents the tears our hands have wiped away, the children the our hands have raised. If you stick around after church we will watch the film RBG together and this is a woman whose hands have constructed justice- I will almost guarantee, and this applies to every single person here, that someone has either felt the presence of God or come to know God better because of your hands. Your hands have at times been the hands of God. And when do you ever stop to pay them the respect that they deserve? Sure, hand washing is great for public health and the CDC would probably thank me for this sermon, but the point is bigger than that. **How might we be transformed, be changed, if we actually gave our hands the credit that they deserve?** How might our spiritual walk grow deeper if we spent 30 seconds a few times a day letting clean water and soap run over our hands as we remember the things we've done, the people we've touched, and the power of our hands to do God's work?

So this is my Lenten challenge to you. I don't want you to just wash your hands. I want you to wash your hands with mindfulness, let it be an act of worship to the God who made and gave you those hands.

The scripture that was assigned for this second Sunday of Lent is an exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus was a big wig in the religious elite and he was trying to quiz Jesus on spiritual stuff. And one of the things Jesus says is that no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. To which this totally confuses Nicodemus who asks the very obvious question as to how an old man could be re-born. Now, those of us who've lived in the 20th and 21 centuries know the words "born again" as they relate to Christianity very well... mostly used to indicate a particular brand of Christian, traditionally white, usually a reliable conservative voting block in American politics. And while I could go on and on about the history of that (and it is very interesting. What Jesus is talking about here has nothing to do with the 20th century political label and has everything to do with the truth that each one of us who call ourselves Christians ought to, indeed be born again. Every. Single. Day. This means that we never fail to listen for and look for the spirit at work in our lives and in

our world. To me, being born again means growing, loving, evolving, improving every day. To me, being born again means that I give thanks for the challenges, set backs, and joys of the past while always moving forward knowing that God has something more for me in the future. To me, being born again is an invitation to be in conversation with the living God every day and to live in this complicated and strange world but to find truth and meaning in some of its most unexpected places. To me, being born again means that something as mundane as hand washing offers us an opportunity for growth and reflection. Being born again, to me, means that as I let the warm water run over my hands at the bathroom sink I know that I am, that we all, are a part of God's world and that my hands, your hands, and our hands, are and have been God's hands. And that we are sacred, our lives our sacred, and we ought to act like that's the case.

To me being born again means that even when they tell you that there's no possible way one could write an entire sermon on hand washing then you take them up on that challenge and you show them, because deep in your heart you know that God is everywhere. In our hands, in the water that washes them, in the spirit that surrounds them, and in this confusing world in which we find ourselves.

So please, for the love of God, wash your hands.

And may it be so.

Amen.