One of things that has been a real improvement it seems in our society recently are our handwashing technologies. When you go to rest homes a lot and hospitals, but even in a lot of public places the new technology is nice. You don’t have to touch anything when you use the bathroom for example. The stool flushes automatically, the dispenser functions automatically, the hand dryer turns on automatically. At the hospitals there are anti-bacterial dispenser going on the elevator, going into a room. Because cleanliness is extremely important to personal health. With covid it’s been just about the most important thing. People want to keep things clean because they don’t want to get sick.

So it’s not hard to understand the Pharisees today with their concern for cleanliness. It’s not exactly the same as our understanding, but it’s similar enough that we should be able to understand it. They felt exactly the same way about staying clean as we do. They didn’t understand about germs, they didn’t have the scientific understanding of diseases. But feeling was the same. There was a lot of things around them that they didn’t want to be contaminated with. The other day, there was a dead squirrel out in our back yard, and I had to go pick it up and put it in the trash. It’s an ugly job. The Pharisees were just like everybody else. Certain people, dirty people, people who had diseases, just made them go ew, don’t get that on us.

This whole orientation should make sense to us right away. When I was a kid, a phrase that I often heard was this, “Cleanliness is next to godliness”. And through my years of growing up, it was this notion of clean living that people understood to be the Christian life. There’s all this bad stuff “out there”, Hollywood, the internet, the drug culture, pornography, pre-marital sex, smoking and alcohol. Just this endless list of contaminants that we were to make sure we didn’t see or touch etc. I”ve said it a few times before, but this was my mother’s understanding of the Christain life. Her minister told her to imagine that she was wearing a beautiful white dress. And her task as a Christian was to not get that dress dirty. Not hard to understand the feelings here or the power of the argument. This is a tremendous force of religious influence and teaching in our lives. Stay clean. Keep it clean. Clean up your life.

Now very few of us would argue that this desire for cleanliness is in and of itself a bad thing. We know the essential value of keeping our hands clean in the hospital and before we eat. It’s vital. Even now we quarantine people who have diseases that might enter into the population. Surely, we understand the value of keeping our children away from bad influences, there are people out there we need to avoid. Surely we understand the problems associated with pornography or alcohol or other activities that so easily have life damaging consequences. Purity is a powerful influence in the Christian life. It draws people in. Here I’ll be pure. Wash me as white as snow….

So our text begs the question doesn’t it? Why is Jesus so disrespectful and critical of this orientation? Surely we understand the offense here. If I used the bathroom, didn’t wash my hands and then came out and gave you communion, and did it openly, there would be a visceral and offended reaction. And rightly so. This is what Jesus and disciples do. It’s a violation of protocol and of deeply help beliefs and values around cleanliness. What is going on here, that Jesus gets in their face about this need, this insistence on staying clean?

I think the answer is very simple. There is nothing wrong with purity and cleanliness, and we will continue to uphold those values and teachings. But the thing that must drive Jesus absolutely nuts, is just so simple. It’s all external. The contaminants, the dirt, the bad, are all external. All the bad stuff is understood to be outside of me. Once you catch on to it, it’s a remarkable and disturbing orientation. The bad people, the bad TV shows, the germs, the bad influences………none of it is me. Then I can say I’m living the godly life because I don’t drink, and I don’t smoke, and I don’t do drugs, and don’t do porn, and I’m not like those bad people over there. It’s all external. I don’t really have to look at myself.

Once you see that, then our Gospel lesson just falls into place. He just says it so directly and openly. There is nothing outside of you that can make you unclean by going in. Nothing you can look at, nothing you can watch on TV, no germs, no bad influences, there’s nothing out there that can contaminate you. The problem isn’t out there, the problem is in you and in your own heart. He just has to forcefully and directly and radically smash any notion that the real problem is out there. As long as that is our orientation toward the Christian life, we miss the message completely. The problem is within me and what comes out of me, not out there and what goes in. And until I get that, I can in no way even begin to be a part of the solution. We have to stop locating the problem out there. I have to focus on what is coming out of me, rather than trying to filter what is going in. That is so different from what you normally get in religious circles. And that is a radical shift, a whole new way of living.

If I had wanted to stay clean, I could never have gone to Tanzania. In order to go there I had to inject myself with disease, seven inoculations. I can’t give blood for a year, because I’ve been to Africa and now I have things in my blood for a while that aren’t “clean”. I have that stigma, that bit of uncleanliness. But if you’re not willing to have that stigma, how can you live the Christian life? People tell me that they hate politics, that they don’t want anything to do with that mess. I’m going to stay from all that. Well then, how can you make a difference? If you’re not willing to get involved in the mess and get in on you, then where’s our hope? That’s what it means to be a Christian, you’re willing to bear that stigma. That your willing to give up your clean status in order to be there for your community and world. That’s why Jesus and his disciples aren’t washing their hands. If you spend all your time trying to stay clean, you can’t be involved in virtually anything. Isn’t that the whole story of Jesus. That he didn’t stay clean up somewhere in sky, but came down to this earth and got all of its sinfulness on him? His purity is that took upon himself our sinfulness. Isn’t that what the cross is about? He had no interest in staying clean. That’s His purity and His love. That’s the entire force of the Chrisitan life. Getting involved. Refusing to stay in the private garden of your own goodness.

But there is more. Because its your problems and your issues and your sins that are the open door to the relationship of love and care that is God’s presence in the world, and the means by which we grow in love toward one another. You can’t be genuine, or real, if you’re always trying to keep up a squeaky clean image. It’s your problems and your issues and your sins that open up the possibility of learning about love and grace and mercy and friendships and all that turns life into a gift. It’s when you reveal that you have problems too, that people can connect to you. That what Grace is all about. Jesus came to be with the sick, not to avoid them. He came for sinners, not to avoid them. He said his presence was with the hungry and sick and the poor and those in prison, all these unclean people he identified as his presence in the world.

People who insist that the problem is out there, and refuse get it on them are usually angry, hostile and critical people. And it seems that people who realize that the problems are within themselves that are gentler towards others, more gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. It’s a miracle. It’s freedom, when you don’t have to keep all of the problems out there. It’s a miracle what God does with that. People get better and their communites are better and there is more love in the world.

We’ll continue to wash our hands, and keep our yards cleaned up (well, sort of) and monitor what our kids watch on TV and the internet. But let’s not turn that into what it means to be a Christian. The real problems aren’t out there. That’s our hope. Amen.