

## “A Holy Hand-Washing”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Now that we are in mid-August, it is starting to feel like the summer has slid right on by. This is the time when we realize there are tons of things to get ready for. In my household, that means getting ready for second grade to begin: the letter that will come any day now, announcing my daughter’s new teacher and classroom; getting new clothes and shoes for this child that has grown like a weed over the summer, fresh school supplies, a haircut, and not only that, but also urging her to go through that packet of worksheets her teacher gave her to keep her mind sharp, eager, and ready to learn second-grade kinds of things-- which is really the goal of all this preparation: to be open and ready to learn and grow the ways her education nurtures her to do.

At church, we will get ready for children’s Sunday School to begin: making sure our teachers are settled for each class and supplied with the curriculum and arts and crafts materials they need. We will get the word out and make sure all the children in our orbit are encouraged to come and learn the stories of our faith and of God’s love for them and for the world. We should probably schedule a clean-up day to clear out the weeds that love to grow on the west side of the sanctuary building. All leadership, especially the pastor, should get ready for The Return of the Evening Meetings. Those who serve at Loaves and Fishes will start planning Monday meals again and recruiting volunteers to help feed the hungry. Mission and Stewardship will start to think about our 2020 budget, and how to encourage generosity to support the church’s mission. Now, all this business may sound a little exhausting to you who are still very much in summer mode, but please keep in mind that it all has a purpose: to make us as a church more open and prepared to learn and grow the ways the Holy Spirit calls us to do.

“Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit,” Jesus tells his listeners in Luke’s gospel. Be like servants waiting for their master to return from the wedding feast, “ready to open the door for the master as soon as he knocks,” whether that is during the night or at dawn. “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming.”

Part of what getting ready means to the prophet Isaiah is being clean. “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean,” the prophet tells God’s people. But the kind of cleanliness the prophet means here is not something you can get from a dunk in the bathtub, or even from a thorough scrub at the Korean spa. It was not even the cleanliness that the Hebrews believed would come by making all the right sacrifices,

“burnt offerings of rams, the fat of fed beasts, the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.” No doubt sacrificing animals such as these in the Temple would have been costly for any worshipper. But blood is not the kind of price God wanted them to pay.

“What, will these hands ne’er be clean?” Lady Macbeth, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, asks as she washes her hands over and over again, trying to scrub away the blood that is invisible. Tormented by her role in all the bloodshed she had initiated in trying to encourage Macbeth to become and remain King, she descended into madness, sleepwalking and realizing the blood on her hands will *never* come out.

Judah has a similar problem, as goes the prophecy in Isaiah. “When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood,” God tells them through the prophet.

Judah is not clean, the prophet in Isaiah proclaims, because even though they say the right prayers and make the right sacrifices, their worship means nothing because it does not shape how they treat one another and it does not guide their care for the vulnerable. In fact, they are making life even more difficult for the widow, the orphan, the oppressed.

Gary Chapman wrote a book called *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts*. In the book, he says that each member of a couple has their own specific love language. Whether through quality time, physical touch, gift giving, acts of service, and words of affirmation, we each have our own language for how we like to give and receive love. The trouble is, it is often the case that people in a couple speak a different love language. It was after reading this book that I realized that when Chris takes my car for a tune-up, it is actually a romantic gesture, because, I have realized, Chris shows love through acts of service. She swoons when I handle the claims on our medical insurance.

In the Isaiah prophecy, God is angry, because the people have been showing love to God through gift-giving, and probably words of affirmation. But they have failed at offering the kind of love God most desires, at least in that moment: by doing justice and caring for God’s people.

Just like in a romantic relationship, where couples need to learn to sense what their partner longs for to feel loved, we need to also have that kind of listening presence with God-- and respond accordingly.

“Come *on* Lucy, there’s nothing there!” I tell my dog on just about every walk as I gently urge her forward. But what looks like nothing to me but a root of a tree or a clump of grass, to my dog holds the mysteries of the universe. In just a few intoxicating sniffs, the 100 million sensory receptors in her nose tell her everything about each creature that has passed through that spot in the past 12 hours. These scents unmask power, sex, life. Through them she finds out what other dogs ate, and whether they were feeling fearful or friendly, ferocious or...frisky. By smelling her daily “pee-mail,” Lucy can make herself ready for response to whatever animal we might encounter on our walk, and will inform whether she approaches them playfully or aggressively, or if we should run away to avoid danger.

Are our *spiritual* receptors as open and ready to sense and respond when Christ is near to us? We aren’t Episcopalian, so we don’t wave incense to smell that God is here. What if our whole bodies were engaged with what God is doing in the world, and as our senses become aware of what God is doing, we are tuning our bodies to respond and take part in God’s action here on earth? I think being in tune and responsive like that would help us to love God better.

If Isaiah were giving a message from God to us today, instead of speaking of sacrifices, God might tell us, “I don’t delight in your *thoughts and prayers*.” Lots of politicians like to express their “thoughts and prayers” publically, especially after a tragedy. They utter words of sympathy, but fail to pursue justice. Thoughts and prayers, with no change, and no action, worships the status quo and does not worship God.

So let us wash our hands in ways that show we are really clean, and really ready to love and serve God. That will mean recognizing that we each have some part we play in the inequalities around us-- whether we have created them, or whether we benefit from them. For example, I cooked and served chicken twice last week. NPR reported last week that our meat-packing industry in this country is heavily reliant on the labor of undocumented immigrants, who will work for cheap labor, and will not demand labor benefits or workplace health and safety protections because they just want to keep their heads down and do the work. So, I can be angry at how ICE detained 680 workers in meat-packing plants, some of whom were parents who would not be able to pick up their terrified children from their first day of school. And I *am* angry about that. But I also know that when I get a good price on chicken at Shop-Rite, I am connected in some way to these immigrants, through the meat industry that exploits their labor without protecting them or their families. Now I admit to you, I love meat, and so does my family. But just as Isaiah tells us that loving God means more than sacrificing animals at

the altar, I need to pay attention to the human cost of the meat I buy and cook, and consider how it connects me to the vulnerable of today's society.

People are you ready? We offer, through the Deacons today, the Ritual of Prayer and Anointing. You could consider it one of the things we can do to show our devotion to God. But let's think of it today as a preparation, a way of being ready to be part of the healing and wholeness Christ brings. Some people wait for the world to be destroyed, and then-- they think-- Christ will return. They see wars and famine, disease and environmental destruction as the necessary steps that must happen before Jesus descends in clouds and hands over to us a new and improved world, so that we can dispose of the old, worn-out one. I believe those people have it all mixed up. What if Jesus' return to us comes when we have done all the necessary preparations for his arrival: when we cease to do evil, and learn to do good. When we seek justice, and favor the well-being of those on the margins: the oppressed, the widow, the orphan, the undocumented. The invitation is before you. Come, and take part.