

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from the one who cleanses us from all unrighteousness, Jesus Christ, Our Lord, amen.

There are many words we use in church language today we truly don't understand. We might have an idea, but if asked to explain them, we would stagger a bit, stammer a bit, maybe even say, well, my pastor can explain it better than I, let me get him to explain it... To be honest, I don't mind, because I love to share the meanings of these words, to make them come alive – because they are incredible. When I share the Greek meanings of some of the words in our weekly Bible scriptures I almost always have people say how much they appreciate getting a deeper insight into the meaning of the lesson. As much as I like the appreciation, it also provides a bit of job security for me.

Sometimes they're really big words, multi-syllable words, that take about a page of notes and scripture quotes to define. Words and concepts like redemption, sanctification, or propitiation! When we really want to sound really “churchy”, we combine a few of them, making comments about forensic justification, eschatological prophecy, or substitutionary atonement, or put them in a different language, like *Lex Orandi*, *Lex Credendi*, or *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide*, *Sola Christo*, *Sola Scriptura*. Each one of these words, really has an incredible meaning for Christians because they attempt to describe aspects of our faith, but in the maze that is our language, more than likely, their meaning is lost.

Today I'm not talking about one of those four syllable seminary words.

Today's topic is a simple four letter word. It's one I think we lose the meaning of, all too often. It's at the core of today's Gospel reading and it's what the Old Testament reading calls the people of Israel to be. When we embody this word the whole armor of God protects us. The word is... Holy.

Being Holy is made far too complicated in this day and age. Part of it is do to how difficult holiness is to envision. The difficulty comes because holiness is a state of being, not something we do, or attain. In today's Gospel, the lack of holiness is so easy to describe. It's easy to see when someone or something lacks holiness, but what does it really mean or look like to be Holy?

When I talk about the word Holy with my Confirmation students I often tell them something that is Holy is simply a person or thing that is set apart specifically and solely for God and God's purposes. Like this sanctuary for example. We wouldn't consider playing games in here or hosting parties in this place. This room is set apart for one purpose and one purpose alone, to worship our Lord and God. To use another more common household illustration to describe what Jesus is talking about when he talks about how Holy things can become defiled.

For me, one of the most sacred things in my house is my toothbrush. Yes, that's right, my toothbrush. My toothbrush is set apart for one purpose and one

purpose alone, to clean my teeth. I don't use it to brush the dirty dishes or clean the sink or, God forbid, the toilet. No, I put this thing in my mouth twice a day and when it's not in my mouth it's covered and sitting on the counter in my bathroom. This is my "holy" or "sacred" toothbrush and I will now defile it.... (put toothbrush in the dirt)... Anyone want to borrow my toothbrush to use to brush your teeth with?

Brushing my teeth with this toothbrush right now, would be horrible. It's not clean, it is defiled, it has not been used for that which it was created. To be holy, means to be set apart to a task, a special usage. This toothbrush can no longer be used for what it was created to be used for. It is unclean, defiled, and will never be able to be used for what it was set apart to do again.

When we talk about a person being defiled, we are talking about the effect sin has on us. Both our own individual sin, and the corporate sin of humanity. The Problem is we are defiled. We have been made common because we no longer are set apart for our one and only purpose we were created for. The Pharisees saw this as an outward problem. We do today, as well, don't we? The Filth Jesus was concerned about doesn't come from not washing hands.

A great deal of the Old Testament, was written about being Holy. When Israel marched through the wilderness with Moses, the commandment specified

that those who were defiled, that became unclean, were to be kept outside the camp, cut off from the people of God, until they could be considered clean again. The scriptures also tell of how long it took, for a person to be considered clean again. Somewhere along the line, the leaders of Israel, the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees, started to really go overboard with this idea of cleanliness. They assumed that physical cleanliness equaled Godliness. If a person ate or drank something out of dirty cup, or off a dirty plate, or sat on a dirty couch, this could result in being unclean “spiritually”. They created had all of these ceremonial washings, literally ceremonial baptisms, of things they considered unclean. Holiness isn’t about hand washing, rituals, or anything else we can do, it’s about who and what we are.

The bad things we do and the good things we have left undone, our sins, are really only a symptom of the real underlying problem. The defilement we all share is our very human nature. Jesus gave a small list of the symptoms; evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. Our sinful acts show that we have a problem that needs to be dealt with. We need to become clean, to become holy, to be restored to the reason we were created! Is there any hope for us? If this isn’t about what we do or don’t do, but our very nature what hope is there for us?

For the Pharisees of long ago and for the Pharisees among us today the answer is all up to us... Scrub, scrub, scrub... Come to Church, pray a certain prayer, get yourself Baptized, repent and try again... More scrubbing... Do you ever really get clean? Does it clean the big stuff? How do I know when I'm clean enough? And so it is, in the lives of sinners. We can attempt to clean ourselves up, but that's not what God intended, and it doesn't work. All of our invented cleansing rituals only deal with the outside superficial problem. We are powerless to deal with what caused the filth in the first place. It is as if I rinsed this toothbrush off in a toilet, and then declared it clean! It might appear clean, but is it? Would you use it even if I put it through the dishwasher? We sometimes think our lives are cleaner. We stopped doing this sin or that sin, but we still haven't really made ourselves holy. We can't...

In our gospel reading today, the passage ends with Jesus saying, all these evil things come from within a person, and they defile them. Because the Pharisees and Scribes did not want to deal with real cleanliness, it was where they were left, in their own defilement. Thanks be to God, who did not leave us in a similar place.

God did for us what we could not do for ourselves. We have an undefiled Jesus who has paid for our unholiness. He has taken on our filth, and died in order to cleanse us from it. Everything that defiles the human race died with Him.

Paul's letter to Titus, shares with us, how we are incredibly cleansed by what God did and not our own actions. ⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. ⁶ This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Tit. 3:4-7 NRS) Because of His own mercy God washes us, making us new again. He washes us, and gives us His Spirit. In uniting us with the death of Jesus, God gives us the gift, the grace of the very righteousness of Jesus. We are again, counted Holy, separated out to be the people of God. We are righteous, justified, holy, because of what Jesus did. God does this, not by washing with water, even the water we use in Baptism, but because of the faith He gives us, in Him. Trust in God because God keeps His promises, and we are forgiven of our sin, and made holy. We are separated off from a sinful world, to be His people; to be His children. The only cleansing agent, able to cleanse us from our sin, the Blood of Christ, covers us in our baptism, as we are united with the death of Christ, and raised with Him through faith!

May we live as Holy people, separated out and living in the world, but not of the world. May our lives reflect the holiness we have as the free gift from the God who loved you enough to die to make you holy. Amen.