

**Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Matthew Welsch Transcript**

“The Ten Commandments, Revisited”

American Christians tend to view the Ten Commandments as a set of strict rules, or even a litmus test for righteousness, preaches the Rev. Matthew Welsch, but “that was never the point.” Going to synagogue with his husband helped him understand the commandments not as rules so much as expectations. “God doesn’t tell us to keep them in order to make ourselves into holier versions of ourselves. God commands us to do these things because it’s what holy people do; because in God’s eyes we already are holy.” The readings are Song of Solomon 2:8–13; Psalm 45:1–2, 7–10; James 1:17–27; and Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23.

Sermon Transcript:

In the name of God, the one who created us, who liberates us, and He's making us holy. Amen. Please be seated.

Hearing this portion of the Gospel of Mark this morning, this conflict over hand washing takes me back immediately to the spring of last year, takes me back to those early days of the pandemic when we, New Yorkers, became obsessed with hygiene. We did this with good reason, of course. In March of 2020, the CDC issued guidance that Americans should wash our hands. We should do it regularly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds we should do this in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19. Hand sanitizers sold out almost overnight. Do you remember that? BuzzFeed published listicles, listing out songs whose refrains lasted for about 20 seconds. The invitation to hum them, rather than the two times through happy birthday that the CDC recommended. I spent the first few weeks of lockdown scrubbing my hands and humming the chorus to Beyonce's Love on Top about 100 times a day. If you're familiar with the song, you know that that is one time for each of Beyonce's many key changes. Our obsession with hygiene for our hands quickly spread to other surfaces. Door knobs, subway polls, countertops. I in late March and early April, set up a fairly elaborate system for wiping down groceries.

A few months later, we learned quietly, but we learned it, that surface transmission is incredibly rare. We didn't need to wash down all of those surfaces. Yet, many of us kept up our rituals of sanitizing everything. In July of 2020, The Atlantic ran an article with a mildly provocative name. "Hygiene theater is a huge waste of time." In it, journalists Derek Thompson defines hygiene theater as risk reduction rituals that make us feel safer, but don't actually do much to reduce risk, even as more dangerous activities are still allowed. I remember reading this article on my phone, I was sitting there doom scrolling that afternoon. My very dry hands were still smelling like bleach and after wiping down all of my groceries. This practice the CDC had already told us was not necessary. One afternoon in February of 2021, when The Atlantic ran a follow-up article by the same author entitled, "Hygiene theatre is still a huge waste of time." I was out for a walk with Joel, my husband. We had just washed down our groceries for the week.

While we were walking, Joel turned to me and said, "Matt, you've devised all of these rules to keep us safe. But it seems like now they're just making you more anxious." Deep down I knew that he was right. By that point, we already knew what we know now, that the best way to stop the spread of the virus is to get the vaccine, to wear masks, to practice social distance, to avoid areas of poor ventilation. We knew all of this, that bleach and hand washing, important as they are, were not the keys to ending the pandemic. For many of us, myself included, the focus had become the rules themselves rather than the science behind them. We had become like the Pharisees that we meet in this portion of Mark, who were clinging to ritual and tradition while totally missing the point. The religious authorities had come from Jerusalem to watch Jesus, to hear what he had to say. As they watched Him and His disciples that day, they noticed that the disciples weren't observing a ritual of hand washing. Now of course, this was a different kind of hand washing. This wasn't quite washing your hands for 20 seconds while you hum the refrain from Dolly Parton's Jolene. This was instead a ritual purification. Not rooted so much in hygiene as it was in an extension of The Commandments.

By that point, the Pharisees and the religious authorities had taken The Commandments, the Law of Moses, and drilled them down into the most excruciating detail. Before long, they had developed excruciatingly complex legal codes, and you can see how it would be easy for the focus to become those rules rather than the purpose, the meaning behind The Commandments themselves. The Pharisees ask their question, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?" they ask. "why do they eat with defiled hands?" Jesus calls this a human tradition, one that has less to do with The Commandments than it does with false ideas of control. Jesus responds by quoting the prophet Isaiah, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Today, Joel and I are celebrating our sixth wedding anniversary. It's a fun little turn of fate, the portion of Song of Songs that we heard today was part of one of the readings at our wedding. Joel is Jewish, and one of the many blessings of our life together has been building a sense of home and community grounded in our respective religious traditions.

This past Friday night, we had friends over as we often do. Now that the CDC says that it is safe, we had friends over for Shabbat dinner. The ritual meal that begins the Sabbath. As we sat down for the meal, I played my part. I lit the candles and I said the prayer. Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam. Blessed are you Lord our God, ruler of the universe. Who makes us holy with commandments and calls us to kindle the light of Shabbat. It's a beautiful moment. When we first started having Shabbat dinners and hosting Passover Seders, which also begin with a different version of the same blessing. I was struck by that phrase. "Makes us holy with commandments." God makes us holy with God's commandments. It's a slightly different reading of how many American Christians understand The Commandments of God. God makes us holy through God's commandments. They are not a list of things that we can do in order to become holy. God makes us holy by telling us to do them. We have a tendency to think of The Commandments as American Christians, as a set of strict rules.

It's as if we imagine God telling God's people gathered at Mount Sinai, "You must do the 613 things or else I will reject you forever." and that was never the point of The Commandments. They are important, critically important, yes. But they are not a set of prerequisites for God's love. Going to synagogue with Joel and celebrating the Jewish holidays with him helped me to understand The Commandments not as rules, so much as expectations. After rescuing God's people from slavery in Egypt, God invites them to stop and totally reorient their lives. To open themselves up to a new pattern of community that better reflects God's vision of justice. Love God, love your neighbor, honor your parents, don't lie or steal or kill, keep your promises, don't act out of jealousy. Of course, rest. These are the things that God tells us we must do as God's people, simply because we are God's people. God doesn't tell us to keep The

Commandments in order to make ourselves into holier versions of ourselves. God commands us to do these things because it's what holy people do. Because in God's eyes, we already are holy. The Commandments are not a litmus test for righteousness, they are an invitation to be the people that God created us to be. An invitation to reorient our lives, our communities, our world, and come into alignment with the justice, love, and mercy of God who saves us.

In this argument about hand washing, Jesus reminds the Pharisees that they have forgotten the reason behind The Commandments. The rules had become the focus instead of God's unfailing love and care for God's people. God's love cannot be earned because God offers it recklessly, freely, unearned and unconditional to each and every one of us. Having encountered God in Jesus Christ, having been baptized in water and Spirit, having tasted the grace and love of God as broken bread and shared wine? We cannot do that and then accept the injustice of the world as it is. When you know what forgiveness feels like, you can't help but go out and forgive other people. When you know what it is to experience grace, unearned, unexpected, unasked for, you can't help but extend that grace to others. This I think is what James is getting at in his letter. "Be doers of the word." James says, "not hearers who forget, but doers who act." Every experience of grace is an invitation to reorient ourselves to God's vision of justice and love. An invitation to remember that there are no rules standing between you and the grace and love of your creator. It's an invitation to love others the way that Jesus loves us, to let go of the world's expectations and achievement, perfection, and yes, even righteousness. To allow the spirit of God to work in our lives. Transforming us step by step, meal by meal, heartbeat by heartbeat. Opening us up to be more and more like Jesus.