

## **“Dirty Digits and Defiling Deeds”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
September 1, 2024 - Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

[James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

Food rules. Perhaps you’ve got some that you enforce in your household, such as eating tacos only on Tuesdays, serving yourself only as much as you will actually eat, always clearing your plate, never eating breakfast foods after breakfast time, only eating breakfast foods after breakfast time, or avoiding things that are green or some other color you don’t like. We all do have rules and traditions that we follow when eating, whether they are clearly stated or even recognized or not or add to our health or well-being or not, and these differ greatly from household to household, which I hope is OK, because I wouldn’t necessarily want to follow your household rules, especially if they involve eating broccoli on a certain day of the week (or on any day of the week) such as one of my neighbors does.

In today’s gospel lesson, we read about Pharisees coming to Jesus and seeking to impose their own food rules upon him and his followers. Specifically, the Pharisees were concerned that Jesus was not following their rules for ritually washing their hands before eating food that came from the local market. This was a tradition of the Pharisees, which was one of many traditions they had concerning what you could and couldn’t eat and how you could or couldn’t eat, which were just some of their many rules about all of life. For the Pharisees were very concerned about traditions and rules, some of which were among the 613 commandments found in the Torah, but many more of which were rules added to those rules. For much of the Bible’s collection of rules, including those concerning the ritual washing of hands before eating, was directed to priestly folks to properly do their work in the temple, but the Pharisees sought to expand those guidelines and how they were followed, so that the hand-washing, food-eating, and other acts ritually performed by priests in the temple would also be practiced by common people in their homes and everywhere else.

This became a source of conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus because he and his followers did not abide by all of their many restrictions, for following rules for the sake of following rules was just not Jesus’ thing. And while there is no evidence to suggest that Jesus did not keep kosher throughout his lifetime, he

taught that it was not what you consume or how you consume it that will defile you as a person. For Jesus, it was not what you put in that mattered as much as what you did with your well-fed body. Using it to cause harm to others mattered to God and using it to exalt oneself above God and others in other ways mattered. Jesus message was that what really mattered to God was not the input but the output.

This message was echoed by Jesus brother James that we read as today's first scripture lesson. The book of James, parts of which we will be reading on Sundays throughout September, was written by James, who, after Jesus' death became the leader of the community of his followers in Jerusalem, or it was written by a follower of James in his honor and memory, and it was sent around as a letter to the various communities of Jesus-followers in Judea, Galilee, and beyond to provide practical guidance for them, guidelines that they should follow so that their lives would produce the output that pleased God and blessed people. So James instructs them and us to listen more than speak, be slow in becoming angry, receive the teachings of scripture with humility and respond with faithful action. And in the final words of today's lesson, James instructs us to have a pure and undefiled religion by the output of caring for orphans and widows in their distress and of keeping ourselves unstained by the self-serving ways of the world.

Using our energies not for our own gain but to give to others, especially those most in need, is the output God desires and is a sign of a life that is unconstrained by the defiling junk food of selfishness. So may selfless concern for the good of others, especially the lowly, be the rule you follow above all others. Share your meatloaf on Mondays, your tacos on Tuesdays, and your waffles on Wednesdays. Use your speech, never as self-aggrandizing, life-robbing, dignity-stealing word salads, but always to feed and nourish others' spirits by giving nutrient-rich, life-building words of love.

As we gather today at the table to share a meal that reminds us of Christ's life that was given to nourish our spirits, that we might be full of his abundant life, let us be reminded that we take in Christ's body -- his wisdom and his way -- so that we may be Christ's body in the world, actively serving people by continuing Christ's work of freely offering gifts of love that promote the well-being of the world, its people, and all of God's beloved creatures that dwell upon it.

Dear friends, today and always, may we take in God's grace and live out God's love. Amen.