

Baptism, and Ritual Washing in General

A Family Service Talk by the Rev. Michael Gladish
September 13th, 2015

Today our worship is all about washing, not just baptism, which is a special kind of washing, but washing in the way the Jewish people used to do it, the way the Lord Himself did it, and the way we do it every day.

In our lesson from the book of Exodus you heard about a special basin, or wash-tub that was called a LAYER, all made of the metal called bronze, which is mostly copper with some tin mixed in to give it strength. It can be hammered into useful shapes and polished to look shiny. In ancient times it was often used to make pots and pans, and other important tools.

In our story, in the building of the tabernacle, you heard that the Lord told Moses to have his people make a LAYER and put it in the courtyard of the tabernacle, between the altar of burnt offering and the entrance to the Holy Place. They were to fill this thing with water and make SURE the priests all washed both their HANDS and the FEET before they offered any sacrifices on the altar, and before *and after* they went inside the Holy Place. If they didn't do this they were told that they would DIE.

Now that sounds pretty important, doesn't it? What's more, this LAYER was probably pretty BIG. It doesn't say in the Word HOW big, but we know that later on, when they built the permanent Temple in Jerusalem the laver was HUGE, at least 15 feet across the top and over 7 feet tall. But this one must have been a lot smaller – maybe half that size – both because it had to be portable, and because in those days there were only a few priests who needed to use it.

People have had all sorts of ideas about what it might have looked like, but one thing's for sure, it had to be strong with a SOLID base because when they filled it up with water – if it really was about 7 feet wide it could have held 600 – 700 gallons of water, which could have weighed anywhere up to 5,000 pounds! That's heavier than a pickup truck!

To give you an idea how big this thing was, and so you can see how IMPORTANT it was, we will need TWO MEN to go to the back of the room and carry a big whiteboard up here. The board has a picture on it so you can see what we're talking about. [Lean it against the pulpit, with the left edge protruding toward the center of the chancel.]

Describe the image.

Ask: WHY do you think this was so important – that they should wash their hands and their feet?

Well, there were at least two reasons: first of all, camping in the wilderness their hands and feet would certainly get dirty, but the things they had to DO in the tabernacle involved very special, holy things, so washing up was a sign of respect and care for those holy things – sort of like when we take up the Word to read: we should make sure our hands are clean so we don't get the Word smudged or dirty. It was also important for their HEALTH, since the priests were allowed to eat some of the meat that they offered in sacrifices, and you know you can get very sick if you prepare your food with dirty hands.

But the most important reason they had to wash with water from the laver is that it was a sign to the angels of a clean heart and mind. In other words, it was symbolic, and so it is a reminder to US that whenever WE come to worship the Lord WE also need to have a clean, clear conscience. Our hands and feet especially remind us of the things we DO, so when we wash our hands especially we can think about “cleaning up our acts” and living cleanly.

And how can we do this? Well, just as the Jewish priests drew water from the laver we can draw truth like cleansing water from the Lord's Word. And the enormous amount of water in that laver is a reminder to us of how very, very much there is to learn from the Word. For like the laver, the Word is both wide and deep, and full of the water of life to teach us what we need to know to keep from getting sick ideas and attitudes, or doing things that cause our faith to die.

Now in our second lesson today from the Gospel of Mark we had an interesting story about people (the Lord's disciples) being criticized for NOT washing as they should have, and the Lord seemed to say that it didn't really matter after all. There He even spoke of washing all sorts of things, like cups, pitchers, bronze vessels and beds! And He criticized THEM for following the traditions of the elders while ignoring the more important teachings of the Commandments.

But He wasn't really saying it didn't matter; He was saying it wouldn't do any good for them *in their spiritual lives* if they didn't do the more important things that the Word taught, too. In fact, these people were what we call hypocrites: they weren't really trying to do the right thing, they were just picking a fight with the Lord. Yes, it's good to wash your cups and pitchers, pots and pans; who wants to

drink out of a dirty cup? But if that's all you think about you're missing the point that there are more important things – like keeping your thoughts clean and living with a clean conscience by doing what is good and helpful to others.

The Lord made this very clear in the verses after our lesson (Mark 7:14-23) where He said that “there is nothing that enters a person from outside that can defile him,” but the things which come out of him, from within the heart defile him, things like “evils thoughts, adulteries... murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit... blasphemy, pride, and foolishness,” among other things. These are the sort of things He teaches us to wash off so that they don't contaminate us. The ordinary washing of our hands is just a sign and reminder of this.

This is why we have the ceremony of baptism in the church. It is a sign and reminder of the importance of wiping off the crud that comes into our minds from the world around us – and also from the bad spirits in hell who want to give us bad attitudes and bad ideas so that we will be like them, and be their slaves. And we wipe that crud off by learning and using the truths of the Lord's Word.

Do you remember that when the Lord was preparing Himself and His disciples for the end of His life in this world, at the beginning of His last week in Jerusalem, after His last supper with them He washed His disciples' feet? This also was a reminder to THEM about keeping spiritually clean by taking the Lord's advice and doing what He had taught them to do. What's more, He told them that by washing their feet He was giving them an example of what to do for each other. Now what does THAT mean?

Of course we *could* wash each other's feet; but the real point is that the Lord was teaching us to help each other *keep our words and actions clean*, to encourage one another by not allowing dirty language or hurtful things among our friends.

Let's face it, we all have times when we feel sorry for ourselves, when we want things that belong to others, when we wish we could control other people so that they do what WE want instead of what they want. We might not realize it but these are the sort of things that the evil spirits love because when we start thinking this way they can really get control of us and push us to make dumb decisions.

So when we find that a friend or companion seems to be feeling this way we can HELP – not by telling him or her what to do but by setting a good example, refusing to go along with that, changing the conversation, or suggesting better things. You could also simply say, “That doesn't sound very good; let's try to think of something better to do.”

In churches we usually only baptize people once because it is a sign of a new beginning, beginning to learn what the Lord teaches us so that we can live well. But you know, you wash yourselves EVERY DAY; you have to because you naturally get your hands dirty, and if you wore sandals or walked around in bare feet all the time your feet would get dirty, too. In fact they get sweaty and stinky even when you wear shoes. So washing is important for your natural health.

But the spiritual washing or cleansing of your thoughts and actions by means of the truths in the Lord's Word is even more important. Can you remember this, and at least once in a while when you wash your hands at home or at school can you just say to yourself very peacefully, "This is a good reminder to keep my mind or spirit clean, as well, to get rid of the crud in my life and just do the right thing"?

There will always be dirt, and we will get dirty. But we don't have to let the dirt stick to us. We can wash it off every day just as the priests did at the laver in the courtyard of the tabernacle and make a clean, fresh start, with the Lord's help.

Amen.

Lessons: Readings for baptism in the Liturgy
Exodus 30:17-21, Mark 7:1-9
Arcana Caelestia #10238:selections