

September 2, Ordinary 22B (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

What does it mean to be seen as a defiled person?

by [LaDonna Sanders Nkosi](#) in the [August 15, 2018](#) issue

The Pharisees and teachers of the law have come with questions. They ask Jesus, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” Traditionally, when coming from the market they would be expected to ceremonially wash their hands. These religious leaders are here to scrutinize Jesus’ operations and catch him in the act of inconsistency and violation of the law.

The text does not explicitly say, nor does anyone ask, why Jesus’ disciples did not wash their hands. It is also possible that the disciples did wash their hands, before the Pharisees and scribes arrived. People come with accusations and judgments, often from the outside looking in. Care has to be taken here. There’s always a story behind the story.

In Mark 7, Jesus deals directly with questions of what defiles people (verses 1–23) and religion (24–37). Faced with the tradition and its demands, Jesus declares that Isaiah was right: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine.”

This notion of who is defiled and who is not underlies some of our current religious and political discussions and debates. Finger-pointing about who is defiled, who is unclean, is commonplace—even and especially among us in the churches.

But what happens when you are seen as one who is defiled?

Growing up in a small town in Missouri, I came to know God and had a great love for my home church. I was very involved there during my college years. One Wednesday night, just as choir rehearsal was ending, I stepped out of the choir stand and walked down a few stairs and across to the pulpit. A hush fell over the sanctuary. One of the elder ladies spoke up: “Baby, you can’t be in that pulpit.”

It was such a strange moment. I didn't understand it. "OK," I said. And no one said another word about it.

A year later, when I came back to the church while visiting from graduate school, I was informed that there would be a church business meeting. Never having attended a church business meeting, I was excited to be back, and I made plans to attend.

That night, the church was filled. One of the deacons stood up and announced that there would be a debate on whether or not the pastor could have a female clergy colleague come and preach for his pastoral anniversary. Up until that moment, I did not realize that women could not preach in the church. That night I watched as church elders stood up on each side of the debate, using scripture to support their point for or against. I watched people I respected and looked up to—some of them women themselves—stand and plead that no woman could speak and preach in the church.

Sitting there, I remembered that moment when I crossed the threshold of the pulpit and stood there. I remembered the palpable discomfort in the room as no one could explain to me why it was a problem. Years later, in seminary, I learned that these traditions have roots in the belief that women have the potential to defile the pulpit. That time after choir rehearsal, when I walked through the pulpit area, some people thought I defiled the pulpit as sacred space. The woman who was invited to preach the pastor's anniversary sermon was also seen by many to defile the pulpit.

According to church and denominational law, this was not allowed. My home church subsequently split over this debate.

What does it mean to be seen as a defiled person? Who are the people who are seen as defiled in our society? Have you ever been perceived as being defiled?

Many wrestle daily with unworthiness, feeling marred or judged, checking themselves for imperfections. What is key in Mark 7 is that while the Pharisees and teachers of the law are judging Jesus' disciples, those disciples continue to serve with him. They remain his disciples, in spite of others' judgments and critiques.

Jesus reminds us that what comes out of us is what defiles a person (Luke 6:45). In this week's Gospel text, Jesus calls us to take a heart check and to check ourselves for what is coming out of us. What are we saying? What are we producing? Who are we as a people in his sight?