

There is a classic scene from Sesame Street in which Grover shows difference between near and far. His growing dismay over the difficulty his audience apparently has in understanding what he is saying is really kind of hilarious.

He begins by saying, “Okay, this is near.” And does a kind of jump in place.

Then he runs far back from the plane of the camera and shouts back, “This. Is. Far.”

He runs back forward, certain his job is done and a little out of breath. But then says, “You want to see it one more time?” And slightly sarcastically, “Oh sure, I’m not doing anything.” So, he shows near again and then he then turns and runs to the far position, saying “This is far.” Then he runs back, saying, out of breath, as he arrives near to the camera, “You got that? You. *Don’t*. Got. That.” So he says again “This is near,” and then turns around again and runs back, saying again, “This. Is. Far.” Then, even more out of breath he runs back, saying as he arrives, “You must understand. You don’t, [breath] don’t, [breath] under...” and then he turns and runs back, repeating his position on far. He comes back, exhausted and says, “*Now* you understand!” Then with utter dismay, “You. Don’t...” and collapses, utterly done in.

I might have skipped a couple of rounds. Who knew the difference between near and far could be so hard to explain or understand?

But it is surely an issue in our readings this weekend.

In our first lesson Moses is speaking to the Israelites, preparing to hand them into Joshua’s care before they enter the land God has promised them.

Clearly this entrance to the promised land is an important time in the life of the people. We heard Joshua’s speech about it last week. Maybe it’s like dropping a child off at college. They’re going to be on their own now and you want to make sure to get in a final word of

wisdom. Both Joshua and Moses seem to speak from a place of concern. They seem to have an understanding of faith's fragility

Joshua calls on the people to put their faith in God, as he and his family have pledged to do, because he realizes that they will be faced with many alternatives to God. The gods in the region beyond the river, the gods of the Egyptians, the gods of the Amorites, and certainly the gods of the land they are about to enter—the gods of the Canaanites. So many other god options...

Moses, in some ways, has even greater reason to be aware of faith's fragility. He's been told by God that he will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land and it's because of the faithlessness of the people he was called to lead. (No pressure people...!)

So Moses begins a long sermon calling the people to faithfully live into the promise of God by charging them to follow God's law—the law given at Mount Sinai. That's what the book of Deuteronomy is. The name actually means second law-giving. The whole book is a giving of the law, but our passage introduces Moses' first sermon, and the point of the whole sermon is summed up in verses 7-8. First he says, "...what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?"

He doesn't brag about God's power and might, although he certainly could, as the Lord has given them victories over their enemies all along the way. He doesn't brag about God's wisdom, although he certainly could, as the Lord has safely brought them out of slavery into freedom. He doesn't brag about God's providence, although he certainly could, as the Lord has given them just what they needed, when they needed it.

Instead he lifts up God's presence with them. God who walked in the garden, God who gave them bread and water, God who has spoken to them through Moses, Aaron and Joshua, that

God is with them, near to them, journeying alongside them. That God hears their cries and responds when they call. The Israelites have a God who is near, close at hand. Not faaaar... like the gods of the nations that surround them.

He follows up with the second part, "...and what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?" The law for the people is not a burden. It's not an obligation. It's not something their parents make them do for reasons they can't understand. It's not something intended to fetter their freedom. The law is a manifestation of the nearness of God. A gift that holds them in relationship with one another and that draws them closer to their God.

But they need to take care and watch closely, that they don't forget the things their eyes have seen or let them slip from their minds all the days of their lives.

Because mutual relationship with God is not automatic. It doesn't happen by osmosis, seeping into our lives from our pillows at night. God is near, but it is possible to turn away from God, to forget God, to neglect to pass on the promise of God to our children, and our children's children.

Moses is telling the people that relationship with God is nurtured when God's law is heard, taught, repeated, enacted and fully lived. In the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Exodus, God told Moses to say to the people, "...if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

Through all that would follow, challenges from other nations and other prophets, the cycling of kings who are for the people both strong and weak, the building of a kingdom and the establishment of the Jewish nation, and finally and powerfully, the experience of exile, the

people know that it is through adherence to the law that they know and experience God, and that they maintain their identity as God's people. Even as they are separated, defeated, exiled and finally allowed to return to Jerusalem, they know who they are and to whom they belong because throughout the law guides their lives together.

Which brings us to our gospel lesson.

The Pharisees have taken issue with the fact that some of Jesus' disciples are eating without first washing their hands. The narrator then says that the Pharisees and all of the Jews do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands. Then we get a bunch of detail about not eating food from the market unless it is washed, and other traditions around the washing of cups, pots and bronze kettles. Some ancient manuscripts even include beds in this list of things that must be washed.

Washing hands seems like a good idea and is probably something most of us would encourage our children to do. And the narrator said that *everyone* does it. But Jesus gives the Pharisees a tongue-lashing for their criticism, calling them hypocrites and quoting back to them from Isaiah. He says, in effect, "...they honor me with lip-service, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain, teaching human rules as if they were the law."

Because, in fact, nowhere in the Hebrew Bible does it say that the Jewish people needed to wash their hands before eating. There was other washing that was required in different circumstances. Only priests were to wash their hands before eating.

What had probably happened is that the practice of handwashing had spread from the priests to the people, particularly among those Jews who had ready access to water, versus rural people, like the disciples. It may have been a response to the very call of God, which I mentioned earlier, "You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy people." The Pharisees, who had

particular responsibility for interpreting the law and helping the people to follow it, encouraged ordinary Jewish people to live more closely to the standards for priests, so that that they would live a holiness of life that would better shape them to be God's people.

But Jesus pushes back against the adoptions of tradition and history. It doesn't matter what rites they follow or what words they say if their hearts are far from God.

In proclaiming his ministry, in the first chapter of this Gospel, Jesus says, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.

God is at hand in the person of Jesus, standing right there, saying like Grover, "This is near!" But the Pharisees are worrying whether the disciples have washed their hands or plucked grain on the Sabbath. It seems their hearts are far.

God's nearness, always a promise to God's people, always hope for their lives, has come to breathing, heart-beatingly real life in the midst of the people, but the Pharisees seem not just blind, but actively resistant to that possibility.

In Jesus, God is teaching and preaching and healing. In Jesus, God is breaking boundaries and calling the people to a new way of seeing and hearing and living. In Jesus, God is welcoming sinners and eating with tax collectors. But the Pharisees are calling for a religious way of life that uses the law to exclude others, to create walls and put a fence around what they understand to be right, keeping out everything and everyone who seems to be wrong.

Jesus explains to the crowd that it's not what is outside a person that by going in makes a person unclean or unholy, instead it is that which is within the human heart. That tendency we have to want to draw lines, to say this is right and that is wrong, or I am right and you are wrong. The ways that we hurt one another, through greed, wickedness, cheating, jealousy, assuming the

worst of one another. That brokenness which can seem very much a part of our lives and deeply woven into the fabric of the world around us.

I've been getting ready for the kickoff of confirmation and have been working ahead on our first lessons. This year we'll be talking about the Bible and we start off in the first chapters of Genesis, considering both creation and the brokenness that showed up so quickly in God's good creation. On the day we talk about the human condition, which is a condition that seems to want to turn away from the God who is always with us, we consider a quote from the famous Russian dissident, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. He said, "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

That impulse we have toward all those things that separate us from God probably means that there are times when God feels like Grover, increasingly dismayed at how difficult it is to show us the difference between near and far. "This is near!"

In our second lesson, we hear, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above." Our generous God has promised to be near to us, and that promise lays a claim on our life. James' recommendation is not just to hear the word, but also to *do* the word. Living out our faith, acting it out in our prayers, in our worship, in our study of scripture, in the way we share from all that we have been given, in our care for our neighbor in need and in our connection with a family of faith—all of that helps draw us near to the God who, in Jesus, is ever near to us. All that makes "near" so much easier to understand.

And what a relief that would be to Grover!