

A Little Dirt Is Good For You

A teacher observed a boy entering her classroom with dirty hands. She stopped him and said, "Johnny, please wash your hands. My goodness, what would you say if I came into the room with hands like that?"

With a smile the boy replied, "I think I'd be too polite to mention it."

A pastor says his son's Sunday School teacher approached him after church and said, "Let me tell you what your son said in Sunday School today (a phrase sure to strike fear in the heart of every pastor). She had been teaching about how God created Adam from the dust of the earth.

To which his son Luke said, "You mean I'm made out of dirt?"

The teacher responded, "Well, in a sense, yes."

Luke thought for a moment, processing this information through his four-year-old brain. Then Luke said, "My Mom is NOT going to be happy about that!" (1)

One mom was frustrated by how often her four-year-old son, Brian, was getting dirty playing outside. At wit's end, she finally said, "Brian, can't you play someplace where it's cleaner?"

"If God didn't want us to play in the dirt," Brian logically said, "why did he make so much of it?"

With Brian's observation in mind, I want to share with you some information that will encourage some of you who are parents and perhaps horrify some of you who are grandparents. Earlier this year the New York Times carried an article by Jane E. Brody titled, "Babies Know: A Little Dirt Is Good for You."

"Ask mothers why babies are constantly picking things up from the floor or ground and putting them in their mouths," writes Ms. Brody, "and chances are they'll say that it's instinctive that's how babies explore the world. But why the mouth, when sight, hearing, touch and even scent are far better at identifying things?" Here's the conclusion of many scientists: eating dirt is good for you.

In studies of what is called the hygiene hypothesis, researchers are concluding that organisms like bacteria, viruses and even worms that enter the body along with "dirt" spur the development of a healthy immune system.

One leading researcher, Dr. Joel V. Weinstock . . . said in an interview that the immune system at birth “is like an unprogrammed computer. It needs instruction . . . Children raised in an ultraclean environment,” he added, “are not being exposed to organisms that help them develop appropriate immune regulatory circuits . . . Children should be allowed to go barefoot in the dirt, play in the dirt, and not have to wash their hands when they come in to eat,” he said. He pointed out that children who grow up on farms are much less likely to develop allergies and autoimmune diseases. Also helpful, he said, is to “let kids have two dogs and a cat, which will expose them to intestinal worms that can promote a healthy immune system.” (2)

Some of us probably think the good doctor went a little too far, particularly with regard to worms. However, the case seems fairly well made: a little dirt is good for you.

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem saw some of Jesus’ disciples eating food with unwashed hands. The Pharisees and all the Jews, says Mark, do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. They are very careful. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles. So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

Jesus did not respond well to their criticism. He said to them, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

This was not a matter of hygiene. And, it was not even about keeping traditions. Traditions and ceremonies are important. They remind us of our responsibilities. However, it bothered Jesus that the Pharisees could be such sticklers for their traditions and their ceremonies, but so blind to their responsibilities to other people. What was the great commandment? Certainly it was to love God, and traditions and ceremonies help us express our love for God. But what is the second commandment? To love your neighbor as yourself. Here the Pharisees fell woefully short.

Please do not misunderstand. They were not alone. It’s just that Jesus expected more out of them. They were God’s elect. Pharisee means set apart. And yet when it came to how they treated others, they were just like everyone else. They were more interested in their own agenda than they were in God’s agenda, which is redeeming the least and the last. Now, what does that mean to us?

First of all, we need to see that it is good to keep traditions and ceremonies. We see no reason in scripture to doubt that Jesus kept the traditions of his people. We know that he was

in the temple on the Sabbath. We know that he was a student of the Hebrew Bible, he referred to it constantly. He set aside time to pray on a regular basis. Traditions and ceremonies are good. Traditions and ceremonies help us define and hold on to what is important in our lives. People who provide a healthy foundation for our society are those who respect tradition.

In 2005, Ryne Sandberg was inducted into the baseball Hall of Fame. Listen to how he describes his devotion to the institution of professional baseball:

“I was in awe,” says Sandberg, “every time I walked onto the field. That’s respect. I was taught you never, ever disrespect your opponents or your teammates or your organization or your manager and never, ever your uniform. You make a great play, act like you’ve done it before; get a big hit, look for the third base coach and get ready to run the bases.”

Sandberg motioned to those inducted before him, “These guys sitting up here did not pave the way for the rest of us so that players could swing for the fences every time up and forget how to move a runner over to third. It’s disrespectful to them, to you and to the game of baseball that we all played growing up.

“Respect. A lot of people say this honor validates my career,” said Ryne Sandberg, “but I didn’t work hard for validation. I didn’t play the game right because I saw a reward at the end of the tunnel. I played it right because that’s what you’re supposed to do, play it right and with respect . . . If this validates anything, it’s that guys who taught me the game . . . did what they were supposed to do, and I did what I was supposed to do.” (3)

Many people would call Sandberg old fashioned. And perhaps he is. But respect for tradition is important for holding things together whether it is a game like baseball, or whether it is a culture, or whether it is a community of faith, a church.

In Tony Campolo’s book *Who Switched the Price Tags*, Campolo says that as an evangelical Baptist teacher and preacher, one of the most serious errors he made was to underestimate the value of ritual and tradition. From his studies of the famous French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, Campolo discovered how essential and vital “ritual is for the health and maintenance of any social institution.” Studies have shown, for example, “that in the absence of consistent ritual, families tend to fall apart morally and psychologically.” (4)

Jesus was not opposed to rituals, ceremonies, traditions. However, he didn’t want us to substitute rituals for authentic religion or ceremonies for compassion toward others.

Traditions serve to bind people together and make for a more cohesive group. Of course, they can also be silly and inconsequential.

There was an amusing incident several years ago when the Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson, visited Houston, Texas. When the Duchess made her first public appearance in Houston she wore a summer dress and matching white shoes. Now a summer dress can be

appropriate attire in November in Texas, but every good Southern belle knows you don't wear white shoes after Labor Day. It simply isn't done.

Fergie's fashion faux pas caused an uproar. It was the hot topic on all the news shows and radio shows in Houston. Finally, the Duchess' press secretary actually had to issue a press release explaining that this custom was unheard of in England. (5)

Some traditions are just plain silly like expressing dismay at someone wearing white shoes in November. Others can be sinful. Like washing your hands to demonstrate to others your piety, when really your heart is far from God. Jesus quoted Isaiah the prophet: "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

Traditions are good; they are no substitute, however, for a vital commitment to God and to your neighbor.

All of us have rituals we perform. Some of us are slaves to these rituals.

One army recruit says that he had been in the Army for six months when he was awakened early one Sunday morning by the sound of a siren. Instinctively he jumped out of bed, ran for the exit and stood, half asleep, at attention outside the door. Then his mother switched on the hall light, and he found himself standing at attention, on a weekend pass, outside his own bedroom. (6)

What would the army be without rituals? What would academic life be without rituals? What would the church be like without rituals? Rituals, traditions, ceremonies help hold our lives together as we've noted, but they are but a means to an end. The end of life, the purpose of life, is to glorify God and to serve your neighbor. This is something that the world simply doesn't understand.

I suspect that some time tomorrow, August 31, we will see on television some kind of remembrance of Princess Diana. Tomorrow will be the twelfth anniversary of her death in a tunnel in Paris, France, as a result of a high-speed crash that also took the lives of her companion, Dodi Al Fayed, and their driver. It was a tragedy that was chronicled around the world.

When CNN and Time magazine chose the top ten stories of 1997, they based their decision on the impact, significance, and long-term implications of those stories, and they ranked those stories "according to the intensity" of the people's interest. At the top of the list was the death of Princess Diana.

A princess lives and dies with pomp and circumstance. What followed the untimely and

tragic death of Princess Diana was perhaps the most unparalleled expression of anguish ever to follow the death of any human in history. Within hours of the accident, flowers began piling up at the princess' Kensington Palace. People stood for hours in lines waiting at British embassies around the world to sign remembrance books and add their own special thoughts.

For the first time ever, the Union Jack flew at half-mast at Buckingham Palace. It is estimated that up to two billion people watched the memorial services around the globe. BBC television transmitted the funeral worldwide with BBC radio broadcasting the audio in forty-four languages. (7)

The thirty-six-year-old princess captured the imagination of the world. So it would not be surprising if tomorrow mention is made once again of the anniversary of her passing.

I can only hope that the media will recall that someone else died on that same day twelve years ago a little nun in Calcutta known to the world as Mother Teresa. It has been said that Mother Teresa chose the wrong day to die, overshadowed by the death of the young princess. But maybe that's the way it should be. Nothing could better reflect how warped the values of the world are. Mother Teresa wasn't accompanied by a billionaire playboy when she passed from this life to the celestial kingdom. She wasn't being driven in a high-speed luxury car. She lived and died serving the least and the lowest. She lived and died glorifying God and serving her neighbor.

There's nothing wrong with little girls aspiring to grow up to be princesses. How much better, though, if all of us aspired to be more like Mother Teresa. There's nothing wrong with pomp and circumstance. There's even nothing wrong with ceremonies linked to the washing of hands, even though doctors say a little dirt is good for you unless the ceremony of washing hands causes you to look down on those who don't observe such ceremonies, and unless you have clean hands but an impure heart.

Here's the lesson for the day: The meaning to life is not what rank in life you achieve, or even how observant you are of the high, holy days of your faith. The meaning of life is to live in such a way that your life brings glory to God, and the world is a better place because you've been here. The goal of life is to make sure you have a clean heart as well as clean hands.