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2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

When two people are fond of each other, they are likely to share with one another those three special words, “I love you.” However, in the past year, those words have changed. And now, two people who are close are more likely, as a sign of their affection, to say not, “I love you,” but “Wash your hands.” Because, in the midst of a world-wide pandemic, that is what we do now, we wash our hands.

We’ve all grown up with the admonition to regularly wash our hands. To wash after visiting the bathroom, to wash after petting the dog, to wash before eating. To us today, it is the common sense of simple hygiene. Wash your hands and prevent the spread of germs that might make us sick. But this has not always been the case. We’ve only been practicing hygienic handwashing for about 150 years. And the person we have the most to thank for this is a man named Ignaz Semmelweis.

Semmelweis was born in Hungary in 1818, in Budapest. He entered the University of Vienna to study law, but for reasons unknown to us, he switched to medicine. He graduated from medical school in 1844 at the age of 26. Although a brilliant student, he was not able to find employment for two years. You see, Semmelweis was a Hungarian in Austria, and he was a Jew. To secure a position at the Vienna General Hospital, he had to accept the less-prestigious position in as a ??? in obstetrics. Women’s medicine was not highly regarded at the time.

He started at Vienna General in 1846 and immediately noticed that a disturbingly high percentage of women who gave birth at the hospital were dying there. Semmelweis took it upon himself to figure out why.

Vienna General was one of the largest teaching hospitals in the world. Its maternity wing was so big that it was divided into two wards: one for doctors and their students and one for midwives and their students. Semmelweis ran the numbers and realized that in the doctors’ ward, 13 to 18 percent of new mothers were dying of a mysterious illness known as the childbed fever.¹ However, in the ward staffed by midwives, the mortality rate was much lower. It was only about 2 percent.

Childbed fever was a particularly horrific disease that led to death within 24 hours. I will spare you the details, but one writer describes it as “an irreversible descent into an absolute hell of sepsis and death.”

¹ Puerperal fever

Semmelweis was determined to figure out the reason for the disparity in the two wards and how they might lower the number of deaths. Today, any second grader could identify the cause. But back then it was a mystery.

Semmelweis began to take every factor into consideration. What were the differences between the two wards? Was it the fact the midwives had women deliver on their sides while the doctors had women lie on their backs? He ordered the doctors to change the patients' position to match the midwives. But the results were the same. Was it because the women were psychologically damaged by having a male doctor instead of a female midwife? He experimented, but that wasn't the cause. He even investigated the priests. Every time a woman died, the priest entered the ward ringing a bell to deliver last rites. Was the sound of the bell a psychological trigger to the women? He had the bell removed, but women kept dying. Semmelweis couldn't figure it out.

Then, a friend and colleague died. That man, a doctor, had been performing an autopsy when he cut himself with a scalpel. Although he was not an expectant mother, his symptoms mimicked childbed fever. Semmelweis wondered if there could be a link?

In those days, doctors did not wash their hands between patients. Instruments were not sterilized. A sign of a good doctor was, well, one who knew how to get his hands dirty. Semmelweis studied the patterns of the doctors in the maternity ward and realized that they often started their days conducting autopsies on the women who had died the day before. They would then go and perform examinations and deliveries on expecting mothers with hands still covered in the filth of the autopsy.

They had no idea. Louis Pasteur's germ theory would not emerge for another two decades. Most doctors still ascribed to the "miasma theory" that held that wafting toxic odors were largely responsible for spreading diseases through the air. Semmelweis hypothesized that there were cadaverous particles, little pieces of corpse, that students were getting on their hands from the cadavers they dissected. And when they delivered the babies, these particles would get inside the women who would develop the disease and die. Today, we know that these were not "cadaveric matter" but bacteria that is labeled as Group A hemolytic streptococcus.

So, he ordered his medical staff to start cleaning their hands and instruments not just with soap but with a chlorine solution. Chlorine is about the best disinfectant there is. Semmelweis didn't know this. He chose chlorine because he thought it would be the best way to get rid of any smell left behind by those little bits of corpse.

So, what happened? Almost immediately, the rate of childbed fever among the patients of the doctors fell to the same rate as that in the midwife's ward.

In a perfect world, Semmelweis would be marked as a hero. Except that he wasn't. The system conspired against him. It didn't help that Semmelweis was a foreigner and a Jew. He didn't speak German very well. He also had an abrasive personality and would lash out at those who opposed him. And the doctors took his findings personally. They didn't like to think that they were the source of so much death.

He hadn't made many friends at the hospital, and in 1849, just three years after he started, at the age of 31, he was asked to leave. The practice of handwashing at the hospital was dropped. The next year, Semmelweis made a presentation to the Vienna Medical Society, but he wasn't able to convince the medical community on the need for them to wash their hands.

Semmelweis returned to Hungary where he continued to practice medicine and promote the discipline of hand washing. Ten years later, in 1861, he published a book of his findings. But it wasn't well received. In 1865, he was committed to an insane asylum. He had had a mental breakdown. He may have suffered from dementia or Alzheimer's or even the stress of rejection. He also likely suffered from bipolar disease. Ironically, Semmelweis died in the asylum a few months later of gangrene from a wound on his hand.

Ignaz Semmelweis was not the first person to propose hand washing for medical workers, but he was the first practicing physician to do so. It would be another ten years before hand washing became commonplace.

Fortunately, Dr. Semmelweis has not been forgotten. His contributions to modern medicine are heralded today. In 1969, the Budapest University of Medicine was renamed the Semmelweis University of Medicine. In 2018, a statue of Semmelweis was unveiled at the medical university in Vienna. Millions of women have lived because he took the time to notice.

Second Corinthians

Our reading for today comes from the book of Second Corinthians. It is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth. The Apostle Paul is without a doubt the most significant of the church's first missionaries. He devoted his life to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ and founding new communities of faith. The letters he wrote to those fledgling churches make up a critical portion of our Christian scriptures.

From our vantage point, we look at Paul and we see a hero of our faith. We study his life and his letters. His teachings of Jesus form our foundational beliefs. However, this was not always the case. In his day, Paul had many detractors within the church—people who were critical of his ministry and his teachings. Some were concerned by his lack of credentials—Who was this guy? What gave him the authority to preach and teach? Some accused him of being little more than a door-

to-door salesman of God's word (2:17). Paul was also criticized for having a weak physical presence and being an unimpressive speaker. And Paul readily admits that he was not a powerful orator, but that he did stand behind everything he preached.

One particular thing that Paul did that attracted a great deal of criticism was to preach suffering. Paul did not glorify suffering, but he did acknowledge that followers of Christ needed to recognize the suffering that Jesus endured. Paul's words on suffering seem counter-intuitive to us. How could suffering bring us closer to God? Shouldn't happiness do that? Paul taught that in our own suffering we are made stronger. Paul tells that because of his own personal suffering that he is better equipped to help those in the midst of their own suffering. From his suffering, he has experienced God's comfort. Through suffering, there is hope.

At the same time, there were other missionaries preaching counter to Paul's message. Paul somewhat sarcastically refers to them as the "super apostles", because they are so 'perfect.' They are excellent orators; they tell people what they want to hear. Like Paul, they travel from community to community preaching about Jesus. But theirs is a different message, a more palatable gospel. Paul's message focused on sacrifice. Those super apostles preached a more acceptable message scrubbed free of any discomfort or inconvenience. Who wouldn't be attracted to a promise of salvation with no suffering or sacrifice? That's an easy sell. The super apostles were super popular. They framed Paul as being too negative and a drag on the church.

Our reading today from Corinthians is admittedly a bit obtuse and tough to wrap our heads around. Paul is talking about the afflictions and difficulties that Christians face and how these afflictions will lead to a future glory. Our life on earth is a tent. Our tent is only temporary. However, an eternal house made by God waits for us. It is this promise of God that gives us the confidence to *walk by faith*. Our goal should be to please God in all we do.

When we die, rigor mortis sets in. Rigor mortis is a condition that occurs in the few hours following death when the body's muscles stiffen. The Apostle Paul would argue that spiritually we all exist in a state of rigor mortis—we are dead to Christ and rigid in our ways. We are stiff and unable to change. We are stuck in our old system. But Christ offers us a chance at new life, of freedom from death and sin. As he writes, *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

Ignaz Semmelweis changed our world. The system opposed him, but his perseverance and science brought life where there had been death. The Apostle Paul changed our world as well. The system fought him, too. But he never wavered from his conviction in Christ. But our world has also been changed, more than we will ever know, by the person of Jesus Christ. The system opposed him, and killed him. But even in death, he was triumphant.

The Apostle Paul is a hero of our faith. Ignaz Semmelweis is a hero of science. As heroes, they gave of themselves despite the cost. They gave their lives. Not all heroes give their lives. Most work quietly without fanfare. No one writes poems about them. No one sings ballads to their memory. They are the ones whose confidence is in their God, whose goal is to please God, who walk by faith. They are the ones doing what Jesus calls us to do—living lives of compassion to others, demonstrating the power of new life in Christ, changing the system. May we be inspired by all these heroes. May we be a new creation. May we be alive to Christ.