

Who here does laundry in their house? Does your spouse or partner do it, or do you?

Every couple has a story of their partner doing the wash, and mistakenly putting the red shirt in with the whites, with the inevitable result that all white items, including socks and men's undershirts and briefs, become a lovely shade of Pepto-Bismol pink. This is the reason why, on the back of every bottle of laundry detergent, or in the instruction manual for each washing machine, these instructions appear: "sort before washing." Sort out the colored clothes, which will be washed in cold or tepid water, and the white clothes, which are often washed in hot water, with bleach. Why? Because the dye which creates the colors in garments sometimes runs, and will stain the white clothes. Sort and wash.

You can actually buy laundry sorting carts to aid you in this chore at Bed, Bath and Beyond, or even Amazon.com, for prices ranging from a mere \$20 to the astounding price of \$229.95, which buys you a "Mobile Complete Laundry Center including a Fold-Away Ironing Board." Who knew we needed such a thing?

Some of us are a little more basic in our approach, but the underlying theory is the same. We always do that sorting thing first, because we've learned the lesson of the pink BVDs. Sort and wash. Separate out into categories – darks, whites, delicates – first.

Sorting is nothing new. We know this because we have two stories of sorting in our readings from Scripture today, and there's a little bit of washing up, too.

First the easy one: in the Gospel passage, we hear of Jesus' healing of a crazy guy. The fancy Biblical scholar name for him is "the Gerasene demoniac," but for our purposes, it's enough to know that he was a crazy guy. In ancient times, crazy people, people who were considered possessed by demons, were usually cared for by their families. We've read of other situations where people brought their demon-possessed relative to Jesus for healing. But this story is different. This fellow was so uncontrollable that the family abandoned him, and he lived on the edge of town, in the caves that were used for tombs. He didn't have any clothes, and any time anyone went near those caves, his place of refuge, he would come out and scream at them, because of the demons that possessed him. When he was at the height of his madness, even shackles and chains would not hold him, and everyone feared him and his demons.

Jesus came upon him, and commanded the demons to leave the man. In essence, he was sorting before washing - sorting out the man's true nature from the crazy stuff, the demons. Then he could cast out those demons – the washing part. But the demons were quite comfortable living in this poor man, and said, "Jesus, leave us alone." Remarkable thing that the demons recognized who Jesus was, when so many of the supposedly righteous and spiritually healthy did not, but that's a sermon for another day. But Jesus was sorting him out, so he responded to the demons and said "what is your name?" The response came back "Legion." Legion, the word that means many – there were many demons in him. The people who originally heard Luke's story would have also gotten the wry pun – a legion is a unit of 6000 soldiers. This man was possessed by a huge number of demons, just as the Jewish people were occupied – possessed, in a way, by legions of Roman soldiers. They were soldiers who didn't belong in Israel, just as the demons did not belong in this poor man. And Jesus was all about the sorting and the washing out of that which didn't belong.

So after the demons identified themselves as "Legion" Jesus did an odd thing – he asked them what they would like him to do. He was going to do the sorting, have no doubt, but he was offering them a choice in where they would go before they were washed out of the man.

They said, "put us into that herd of pigs over there." This is another odd thing. We're in Israel, a Jewish country. Pigs are unclean animals, unfit for consumption. Maybe they are there because the predominant population in the immediate area is Gentile rather than Jewish, but maybe they are there because the Roman soldiers like their bacon – who knows? – but the pigs are available, and they are considered expendable, just dumb animals, and unclean ones at that, so Jesus washes out the demons from the man and puts them into the pigs, just as they've requested. The pigs aren't too happy about this – Luke reports that they run down the steep hill into the sea where they drown. Pretty dramatic kind of washing out of the demons from the man. Not many washing machines could do as effective a job!

And then the man is sitting there, no longer the crazy guy who used to break chains and shackles, just an average man wondering where he can find some clothes to cover himself, and by the time the swineherds have told people in the village what has happened, and they all come up to see for themselves, the man is dressed, coherent, smiling, washed clean of his demons and his madness. You'd think that the villagers would be ecstatic about this. No more worrying if they

will be accosted by a crazy guy every time somebody is laid to rest in the tombs! But this sorting and washing is frightening to them. If they have been the sort of folks who have withstood the Roman occupation by keeping their heads low and doing nothing to get the attention of the authorities, you can understand their fear. Mightn't Roman soldiers think "if this Jewish magic man can sort the demons out of a crazy man, wash them out of him and send them into pigs, perhaps he is thinking about washing us out of this place...maybe even turning us into some sort of animal and killing us?"

So the villagers tell Jesus, "yes, this is all well and good, this sorting and washing business, and we are grateful that you helped this man, but you are drawing too much attention to us, so please leave." No more sorting and washing here, they say. We just want to lay low, like pigs wallowing in the mud, as invisible as we can make ourselves. But the man who had been possessed knows what happened, and keeps telling the story to anyone who will listen.

We have another story of sorting and washing in our Old Testament tale. We are continuing in our story about the prophet Elijah. You may recall that last week, Elijah challenged Jezebel's husband, King Ahab, calling him to task for murdering Naboth to get his vineyard. He's done some sorting by telling Ahab of his sin, and that he must repent. Ahab's wife Jezebel, who had planned the plot, intends to see Elijah killed. So this week, Elijah is on the run, and he stops to catch his breath under a tree. He's feeling pretty sorry for himself, having realized that the person who does the sorting is not always appreciated (just as Jesus found when the villagers said, "no more sorting here, please) and he says to God "I've had enough. Let me die." But he sleeps and dreams, and is told to watch out for God, who is coming to bring him the next sorting and washing instructions.

He waits in a cave, and watches for the Lord. First, there's a mighty wind, like a tornado. Pretty scary stuff. Elijah thinks, "God sure likes a dramatic entrance," so he peeks out of the cave. No God. Hmmm.

It's quiet for a while. Then everything starts shaking. It's an earthquake! Even more scary than the tornado. "Elijah thinks, "okay, you've got my attention. Sorry for whining before – I was just tired." When the ground stops shaking, he looks out the entrance to the cave. Nothing. Nada. No Lord.

Now Elijah's nervous. What will God do for His third act? Before he knows it, a wildfire sweeps through. Elijah's glad he is in a cave made of rock, and not under that little tree, or else he would have been a little pile of ash. He peers out through the smoke. "Surely God is here now," he thinks, "because all of these disasters are God's handiwork." But still nothing. Just utter stillness. A desolate silence, but for the crackle of an ember.

Elijah goes out and God whispers to him a question, the same question God has asked him before. "What have you been up to, Elijah?" He responds, "I've been doing what you told me to do. I've told the people of Israel how they have turned from you. I've told Ahab he was doing bad things. And now all of the other prophets are dead. All the others were sorted and tossed away. I'm the last one standing, and I expect they're coming for me soon."

The one prophet left after the sorting, afraid, broken by fear, but somehow still able to stand and face his Lord. And the Lord said "Go." As if Elijah had not only been sorted out from the other prophets, but had been washed by the trials he had faced, and was now ready to be sent somewhere different, somewhere new. "Go. To Damascus. Continue in the work I have given you to sort and to wash clean again my people."

Sometimes the sorting and washing is energizing – Jesus certainly doesn't seem to slow down after the healing of the Gerasene demoniac and the pathetic response of the villagers. Sometimes it is a long hard slog. Elijah is exhausted, but that still small voice of God, clear as wind chimes, says "Go. There is more work to be done."

Not a surprise to those of us who do laundry. Sometimes, when all the laundry is washed and dried and folded, the colors in one pile, the whites in another, the delicates in yet another, it feels good. What good work we have done! Other times, we feel drained, because we know that in a day or so the laundry will once again pile up, will once again need the sorting and the washing. And if we feel that way, can we imagine God as the great laundry superintendent in the heavens, who always has another load of souls to be sorted, washed clean, and neatly tucked away? And how it feels to know that the odds are that they won't stay neat and clean, they'll more likely get soiled again and the whole cycle will repeat itself?

Sorting and washing. It's a part of our life. It seems like it's a part of God's life as well. Good thing God doesn't seem to tire of the task. Amen.