

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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FEBRUARY 22, 2009



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Luke 5:12-32

“Clean!”

Luke has introduced us to Jesus the healer, shown his power over demons and disease (and a miraculous catch of fish), and his authority as a teacher of “the word of God.” Jesus is calling people – especially “the poor” – into a new community that he calls “the kingdom of God.” People have named Jesus “Lord,” and Peter has sensed the holiness of God in him. Now Luke brings in several new themes; sin, faith, uncleanness; and for the first time, human opposition from the Pharisees. All this emerges in a series of encounters between Jesus and people who need not only healing but repentance and forgiveness, acceptance and inclusion.

1) The Leper

The first is called a “man covered with leprosy.” The term referred to any number of contagious skin diseases; people infected with them were isolated from the community, forced to live in quarantine outside of town, and in severe cases to cover their faces and cry out “unclean” if anyone approached them. The commentators note that it was therefore a “social disease” as much as a physiological one – it cut people off from family, friends, synagogue, town, respectability.

The Levitical laws instructed anyone who thought they were cured to present themselves to a priest for validation and reacceptance into the community, and to

offer sacrifices. But one man with leprosy is so sure that Jesus can heal, that he breaks all the rules and comes into the town of Capernaum to seek Jesus the healer. He shows his faith in his boldness, and in his words “*Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean*” – physically and ceremonially.

Jesus of course crosses all the cultural barriers and reaches out to touch the man, who is instantly cured, and is sent to the priest for validation. Of course he tells everyone about his cleansing! The crowds who want to see Jesus only increase, so he often slips away to quiet places to pray – in itself a notable thing; that the Son of God resorts frequently to prayer!

2) The Paralytic and His Friends

The second incident involves a paralyzed man, who is equally sure that Jesus can heal him – as are his friends. Their faith is tested by the difficulty of getting near Jesus! So they break through the roof of the house and lower their friend on a mat in front of Jesus! Their boldness and faith are rewarded. Despite the dust and wattle and straw and maybe roof tiles that have fallen on everyone, Jesus does not hesitate to deal with compassion with a man in need – a man who is also ceremonially “unclean.”

But he astonishes everyone by first pronouncing the paralytic’s “sins forgiven.”

This does not mean, as Jesus makes very clear elsewhere, that he believes sickness is a result of sin. Why he chooses to pronounce God's forgiveness on this man we do not know, but it provokes a reaction from the Scribes and Pharisees who are present. "Only God can forgive sins... where does this Jesus get the authority to pronounce forgiveness?"

Jesus confronts their unspoken criticism. They don't believe he can do what he says he has done - and in any case forgiveness is invisible and unprovable! But asserting his authority as the "Son of Man" - a self-identity we shall hear much more about later - Jesus proves he can do the more tangible thing of healing the paralytic.

3) *Levi, His Friends and His Enemies*

The third encounter is with a man who is just as "unclean" as the sick men - a tax-collector named Levi (whom Matthew's Gospel names as Matthew - so quite possibly the Gospel-author himself). His job was to collect customs dues for the Romans on goods that entered his area. These men were despised as Roman collaborators, and considered "snoops, corrupt, the social equivalent of pimps and informants;" "traitors to Israel and Israel's God." The Pharisees in particular classed them as prime examples of "sinners" - notoriously wicked and unrepentant people who operated on the very fringe of Jewish society, seriously "unclean" from their work and their Gentile contacts.

But Jesus calls Levi as a disciple, and then accepts Levi's hospitality and attends a large banquet (toll collectors sometimes got very rich from their corruption). The house is full of "tax collectors and sinners" of various kinds, which bring instant criticism from the Scribes and Pharisees. To share "table fellowship" with such disreputable people was to make yourself seriously "unclean." What did this healer, this teacher, this

dispenser of forgiveness, this "Son of Man," think he was doing?

In Israel in the 1st century, debate raged over what it meant to be a good Jew in a time of Roman occupation. Some groups - the Sadducees, the priestly class - accommodated themselves to it; others saw friendship with Rome as treason, and grew increasingly violent, like the Zealot party. Groups like the Essenes withdrew into separate communities at places like Qumran near the Dead Sea. The Pharisees, probably descended from the *hasidim* - the holy ones - of the Maccabean period, were also separatists in attitude, but they expressed it by strenuous efforts to purify themselves and the nation.

Pharisees were strict in observance of Torah, and of many other traditions they had devised. They wanted to make the ritual purifications of the priests apply to ordinary people as well. They were intent on "marking the boundaries" of the true people of God. So they were deeply concerned with the things that made Jews Jews - Sabbath observance, the food laws, tithing, fasting, and keeping away from "notorious sinners." What was "clean" and "unclean" were major issues for them. And they cared not only about personal purity and piety, but about "reforming the nation."

So in confronting Jesus and his eating and drinking with "sinners," the Pharisees were true to their principles, but they evoke from Jesus the stinging response that it is the sick who need a doctor, and he has come for the "sinners" who *know* they are "unclean" and need healing and forgiveness and release and restoration to society. Jesus won't waste words on those who think themselves "clean" and "righteous." So begins the opposition to Jesus from influential people, and the battle over entry into the "kingdom of God" which will eventually lead to Jesus'

arrest, trial and crucifixion. Nobody but Jesus knows this yet – but Luke, his readers, and we who come after, can already see the shape of what is to come.

4) *Who Is Clean?*

And so the battle has raged ever since. Who is “clean”? Who is “righteous”? Who is “unclean”? Who are the “sinners”? How do you enter the “kingdom of God”?

There have been and there still are many answers. Somehow there is an ineradicable human tendency to see people outside “our group” as “unclean sinners,” and ourselves as “clean and righteous.” So one solution has always been *separatism*. “Come out from among them... touch no unclean thing” are the watchwords of those who think that to be holy and pleasing to God means to keep away from sin and sinners. Separatist groups have arisen throughout history and in every religion, including Christianity. And it has to be said that at times they have preserved the faith and practices of Christianity when the cultures of their day were sliding into the pit. But they have usually been short-lived movements, and have been plagued with internal disputes over what the rules shall be, and who is pure enough to remain in the community. Of course they are still here today.

Whatever the tactical merits of separatism at certain moments, you cannot read the Gospels without realizing that Jesus’ ministry pointed in a very different direction: of inclusion, of acceptance, of crossing social boundaries to reach people in need. Jesus came, he said, for “the sinners” and “the poor” – two barely distinguishable groups in 1st century Judaism, and still represented in every culture today.

Jesus sat down to eat and share table fellowship with “unclean” people, and did

so even before they had repented, in order to draw them into relationship with him and into contact with the grace and forgiveness he had brought into the world. Of course he was ready to tell certain people to “go and sin no more,” but he was far more accepting of “unclean” people than we often are, and he was bitterly attacked for it by those who thought themselves “more righteous” because of their Torah observance and ritual purity.

In the 1st century, all across Mediterranean culture, “shared meals symbolized shared lives.” *To eat with others* meant they were kin, they were intimates, they were accepted. It’s still true today in many cultures around the world – to be invited to someone’s home for a meal is a profound privilege, and should be honored as such if you are invited.

Americans have a much more relaxed attitude to “table fellowship,” but that does not mean that the symbolic value of “breaking bread together” has totally disappeared. There are many reasons that churches are always arranging meals! Expressing love and acceptance to other people – especially newcomers to the community of faith– is one of them.

Touching someone, as Jesus did to the leper, is also a powerful sign of acceptance and inclusion – but also varies greatly across cultures. It can be the most healing thing in the world to be hugged when you need it! A touch of hands can signify real friendship. One of my favorite images of former President Bush was of him walking hand in hand with one of the Saudi Arabian royal family – a deeply felt cultural affirmation of friendship for that part of the Arab world. But there are other cultures or situations where touching is inappropriate; so the ministry of touch is vital, but has to be carried out carefully.

Finally, what should we learn here about *the Gospel* – the “good news” that Jesus came to proclaim? That whoever we are, in whatever condition, he came for us. That if we are really sick, and feel alone and excluded from society, he came for us. That if we have faith that he can do what we need done, we can’t let any obstacles stand in the way of getting to Jesus – even if we need our friends to carry us there. That even if we are regarded as outsiders, beyond the pale, Jesus may surprise us by one day simply confronting us and saying “*follow me.*”

Being an outsider, being someone who has not felt “clean” in years, cannot keep us from the love of God that is personified in Jesus and still at work today through the Holy Spirit. What we need is to do is to admit that we need God’s help. The first step in being cured from many of our sicknesses of body and mind and relationship is to admit that we need to see a doctor! We invent a thousand reasons to not see our physicians or therapists, imagining that if nobody ever puts a name on our condition, it will go away by itself.

Not so – the critical first step in healing, in release, in being made “clean,” is admitting to ourselves, and to God, that we need it. The “good news” of the Gospel, as Jesus said, is that “*he came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*” He can make us whole and declare us whole with a word: “*Be clean!*” God give us the grace to hear and respond.

Let us pray...