

August 17, 2008
Matthew 15: 10-28
“Dirt in Israel”
Pastor Andy CastroLang

There is a story told in our family, about one of us kids, when really small, walking with our Mother, who suddenly noticed that this child was chewing gum. Gum was a great treat for us children, and doled out sparingly. My mother had not given out gum that day and was more than a little surprised, so she asked the 3 or 4 yr. old Lang child (who shall remain anonymous!) where she had gotten the gum? And this precocious youngster, walking down the city streets with her Mama said in all innocence, “the sidewalk”!

Oooh, yuck indeed.

Gum from the sidewalk is dirty. Gum already chewed by one person and then placed in another’s mouth is dirty. Put those two dirty things together and I think everyone in my family was appalled!

Dirty, dirty dirty. (my sister never did that again, let me assure you!) So, let us be honest here, today,: we know what we think is dirty. Though we are diverse in culture, history, race, and creed we do have definite ideas of what is “dirty” in America. We may not agree on all levels of interpreting “dirty” but yes, we have strong ideas of what is dirty and what is clean. Often, it has to do with germs and hygiene, but not always. Sometimes it has to do with placement: so, coffee in a cup is clean, but coffee on my dress, makes it dirty. It is still the same thing, coffee, but its placement tells me whether the coffee is “dirty” or not(not to mention my dress!).

Ancient Israel was enormously preoccupied with clean and dirty; with pure and impure, with what was holy before God, and what was not. In the time of Jesus, the Torah, read every Sabbath in synagogue and temple, and studied fervently, guided the people in their understanding of pure and impure, clean and dirty. One of the distinctives of the nation Israel in his day, and preceding it, was the focus on purity and on holiness. The purity and holiness codes of Leviticus were guideposts for life, not just Sabbath observance, and they were for everyone, not just the temple priesthood.

The two codes of Leviticus cover (and this is not a full list either): clean and unclean animals, a woman’s impurity after childbirth, leprosy, the slaughter

of animals, human discharges, the disposition of blood, idolatry, errors in consuming sacrifices, oppression, injustice, and hatred, mixtures of kinds, wizardry, adultery, incest and other sexual acts, the defilement of priests and their families, the festival calendar and jubilees, and Sabbath keeping.

Whew!

It is not an understatement to say that the people Israel, Yahweh's own chosen people, believed themselves called to holiness and purity even as Yahweh was holy and pure. The land itself was called to purity.

And this was a huge endeavor, a life consuming endeavor!

Acts of impurity had to be remedied, or, when necessary, those impure in their actions, had to be cast out or cut off, and yes, sometimes Leviticus advises killing them.

On Sunday July 20th I stood on the top of the Cliff of Arbel, looking out over the sea of Galilee, and down into a steep ravine, a valley formed by the cliffs and the ridges behind it, called the Valley of the Doves. This ravine also held an ancient trail to Jerusalem. At the edge of the lake and at the mouth of that ravine stood the tiny town of Magdala. Toward the North, we could see the ruin of the ancient city of Capernaum, and off to the right and south, climbing up the steep hillside by the lake, the city of Tiberias.

In the time of Jesus, the entire thriving fishing city of Tiberias, right there on the direct route to Jerusalem, and named after the Roman emperor (and Jewish oppressor) and populated by impure Gentiles; was off limits.

To get so much as a cup of water, an observant Jew must walk the roundabout path at the bottom of the ravine, as they traveled on yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem, careful to walk no further than Magdala instead of into Tiberias.

They would be careful never to set foot on the defiled ground of the city of Tiberias, never touching its soil, tasting its water, eating its foods, sleeping under its roofs.

Because it had been declared: dirty, dirty, dirty.

This was a heavy responsibility, a great burden to those of all walks of life in Judaism but especially among those who were desperately poor, the vast majority of the people Jesus saw around him, there at Genessaret, where the water and the soil were "clean".

And though the priestly caste declared it, and the people were expected to honor this world of clean and dirty; both at the temple in Jerusalem and in every other aspect of their lives, in every village and town – Jesus was dissatisfied with it.

If you do not hear rebellion in words today, then listen again.
He will not have it.

He challenges the very system which raised him, the faith that nurtured him, the people who acclaimed him.

Jesus wants to alter that world of clean and unclean, because he does not see it as life giving. Does it teach the people the love of God, the joy of God, the generosity of God, the grace of God? Or does it create suffering, and blind guides for the blind?

Jesus is a dangerous man, standing there, on the dirt of Israel. Trying to undermine a powerful religious institution, yet believing that he could help its people, and renew it, and keep it from being destroyed by its own extremism.

So, he acts on what he says. He goes to Tyre, and Sidon, “dirty” lands with mixed communities of Jews and Gentiles, trying to spread his new understanding among the people he cares for, the ones who raised him, nurtured him, acclaimed him, the “lost sheep of Israel”.

And he discovers, seemingly to his own surprise - that the power of belief, and the power of that woman’s faith and the power of his hope and healing - that is God’s power - is without bounds, beyond categories of clean and unclean!

A Canaanite woman and her desperately ill child teach the people of Jesus, that the love of God, and the power of hope, together, cannot be tamed by tradition, by cultural and religious bigotry, by labels of clean and dirty, insider and outsider.

Perhaps this seems merely an ancient, historical tale?
But what of our own claims of clean and dirty among Americans: do these categories ever exclude, judge, condemn? Our notions of insider and

outsider, fit for our company or unfit - because of what we do, where we live, because of our race or gender?

Oh yes, we have our notions of clean and dirty too, if we are honest.

One of the single most pervasive attitudes of clean and dirty in America's Christian churches comes through America's attitude towards its gay, bisexual and transgender citizens.

Yes indeed, we have our categories, and our condemnations!

And this church has denied the validity of those categories of clean and unclean, pure and impure based on sexual orientation. Our vote to become an Open and Affirming church was our voice against such categories of exclusion and "pure" or impure. When we chose to say we welcome all to worship, community and ministry, we declared that all were welcome in God's gracious community.

When we chose to become Open and Affirming it was not merely a matter of being nice! (though there is nothing wrong with being nice!).

It is because of this man, our Teacher, our Savior; this radical, upsetting, liberating and amazing witness of Jesus towards our various claims of who is in and who is out of the community of God's love.

It is because of the witness of Jesus that we declare: No one is outside of God's love and care.

Straight or gay, Canaanite or Israelite, Roman Catholic or Four Square Evangelical, Muslim, Jew or Atheist.

If we are honest, there is always someone we consider "the dog under the masters' table".

But again, I say to you, and to myself; no one is outside the love of God.

For in the pithy words of the Canaanite mother, "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table".

It may take us our whole lives to believe in a Creator God this generous, and it may take us our whole lives to practice such love, such blessing, such generosity.

Let us dedicate ourselves to this. Amen.