

Defiled

By Glenn Brumbaugh

So what comes to mind when you hear the word “defiled.”

For most of us, I would venture to guess

that we would imagine things that have been soiled,

that need cleaning to be something

we would consider to be “good to go” again.

We probably think of things that used to be clean and pristine,

but now have dirt, grime, or stains on them

that in some way make them less worthy,

or inadequate for our purposes.

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What criteria do we use to make that determination?

Certainly with food, we want to make sure it’s clean enough

to ensure we don’t get sick from eating it.

Our notions of what is good-looking food

largely are derived from this usually accurate conception

that unblemished food is better for us,

and therefore more appealing.

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We often carry this sense of cleanliness to what we wear as well.

We like our clothes to be clean and stain free,

our shoes to be shiny without scuff marks,

and some of us even like our cars to be pristine as well.

That's one camp I don't fit into.

Generally, it's just best

if you don't look at my backseat

or the general appearance of my vehicle.

Let's just say in my recreational time,

it sees its share of dirt roads and mud.

So we like our food and our stuff to be clean and in good shape.

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What about our people?

What criteria do we use to evaluate them and determine

who belongs in our tent and who doesn't meet the measure up?

Like our the rest of our stuff, do we go primarily by appearance?

Or do we look a little deeper?

That's what Jesus is getting at in our gospel lesson this morning.

The Pharisees address Jesus using their standards

in assessing his disciples as "unclean" or "defiled."

According to their standards,

one must always purify oneself

by ritually washing one's hands prior to eating.

Under their guidance, this has become

the widespread interpretation of the law

brought by Moses' at Mt. Sinai.

But is it really so accurate?

The scripture in question is Exodus 30:17-21:

It reads, "The LORD spoke to Moses:

You shall make a bronze basin with a bronze stand for washing.

You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it;

with the water Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet.

When they go into the tent of meeting,

or when they come near the altar to minister,

to make an offering by fire to the LORD,

they shall wash with water,

so that they may not die.

They shall wash their hands and their feet,

so that they may not die:

it shall be a perpetual ordinance for them,

for him and for his descendants

throughout their generations."

Now this was clearly a proclamation for the priests of the Tabernacle, and later the Temple,

to ritually cleanse themselves before handling the sacrifices to God.

Yet the Pharisees deemed that since all Jews

were in the same covenantal relationship with God,
every meal was to be viewed as a sacrifice to God
and therefore all had to abide by this ritual ordinance.

Like us, they viewed all men as potential ministers,
the priesthood of all believers.

They took something
that was meant to purify someone in the presence of God
and pulled it out of context
to have meaning it originally did not have.

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But more importantly, by finding criteria
to categorize someone as outside the fold,
it reinforces the stereotyping and ostracizing
already present in so much
of the scriptural interpretation of the day.

People like lepers, Samaritans, and Gentiles in general,
were excluded from Jewish society
because of their religious practices,
physical health, or simply how they were born.

But Jesus turns this on its head.

He tells them it's not the rituals
or whether what they put in their bodies is clean,
it's what comes out that matters.

It's how they act and what they say

that determines how pure and holy they are,

not all the external factors.

It's not their personal hygiene, the cleanliness of their clothes,

or the details of their birth that define their value.

In other words, you can't stereotype someone

based on the external factors. It's what's inside that counts.

It's not the cleanliness of your hands,

but the status of your heart that matter.

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In that time the thought was that the source of your thought and attitudes

was based in your physical heart.

It was a very egregious sin to "harden your heart"

or "turn your heart away from God."

Yet that is exactly what the theology the Pharisees promoted could lead to. Jesus consistently countered this narrative

with a different approach to those we would stereotype and exclude.

In the story of the Good Samaritan

he shows how all are our neighbors

and worthy of compassion.

In the story of the Syrophenician woman at the well,

it is her inner faith that makes her worthy.

The list goes on and on.

But it's important to note that Jesus doesn't naysay the ritual itself,
just the conclusions the Pharisees have drawn from it.

Throughout history, this very passage has been used over and over
to actually discriminate and exclude people
based on their attachment to rituals.
Jews, Catholics, and many others
have been shunned and abused
because of the importance of rituals
in their faith practice.

But that begs the question, are we without ritual ourselves?

Do we not follow familiar patterns in worship,
and all know verbatim things like the Lord's Prayer
and our own practice of communion?

Or is it because the ritual of others is so different
that we aren't comfortable with it?

It's human nature, after all, to be comfortable with the familiar,
with those who are more like us.

We like to know what to expect next and therefore
to be around those whose practices and behavior
are more like our own cultural heritage.

The problem occurs when we transfer negative characteristics
onto those whose culture, lifestyle, and behavior differ from our own.

There's a problem when we expect others from different perspectives

to adapt to our point of view in order to be accepted by us.

If the Pharisees had recognized the sincerity of the disciples faith

and just looked past the ritual differences,

we wouldn't have a reading this morning to reflect on.

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It is a struggle though, isn't it?

So much of popular culture is focused on stereotyping other people

as the cause of all our problems, and sadly,

often using parts of scripture, pulled out of context, to justify it.

How often have we heard about all the criminals

streaming across our borders?

Yet statistically, immigrants commit crime

at a much lower rate than citizens do.

We cling to this false image

because they are different and foreign to us,

and we quote part of Romans 13 out of context,

to justify our actions

because we're "obeying the law."

Yet later in the very same chapter,

we're told that to love others is the fulfillment of the law.

We also choose to ignore countless verses in the Old Testament

that speak to treating foreigners residing in your land as equals.

People in the LGBT community are portrayed

as morally bereft and child molesters,
often compared to those who practice bestiality,
yet statistically they less likely to abuse children as heterosexuals.
Their identity is different than what has traditionally been
the accepted and normal .
So we drag five isolated verses from scripture,
all of which are found in sections
speaking specifically against pagan worship practices,
to justify treating them as defiled and not worthy.

You may be thinking, “but pastor, does that mean that anything goes,

that we don’t have any moral compass?”

My response to that would be to say

most certainly we have a moral compass to follow.

Jesus was quite clear that the law and the prophets

can be summed up in two commandments which I’ll paraphrase:

Love God with all your heart, body and soul,

and love your neighbor as yourself without judgment.

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It’s not an easy path to follow. Our passage in Mark is pretty clear though.

We need to focus on keeping our own hearts clean and open,

not judge others for our perceptions of their worthiness

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I’d like to close today with a quote posted by Mike Atkinson

in his daily email humor list some time ago.

If you can start the day without caffeine;

if you can get going without pep pills;

if you can always be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains;

if you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles;

if you can eat the same food every day and be grateful for it;

if you can understand when your loved ones are too busy
to give you any time;

if you can overlook it when those you love take it out on you

when through no fault of yours something goes wrong;

if you can take criticism and blame without resentment;

if you can ignore a friend's limited education and never correct him;

if you can resist treating a rich friend better than a poor friend;

if you can face the world without lies and deceit;

if you can conquer tension without medical help;

if you can relax without liquor;

if you can sleep without the aid of drugs;

if you can say honestly that deep in your heart

you have no prejudice against creed, color, religion, or
politics;

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then, my friend, you are almost as good as your dog.

I like that, because it makes you think about yourself

in relation to what many consider to be a dirty animal.

That fact is: to call a person a “dog” in many cultures

is meant to be derogatory and demeaning.

But maybe such a name isn’t so bad when you think about your own dog

that’s always so glad to see you

even though you feed him the same food every day,

or are too busy to give him much time,

or sometimes take out your frustrations on the poor mutt.

Some people are like that, as well.

Those we might consider “dogs”

may actually demonstrate a strength of character

far greater than any of us here in this room.

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Who is welcome in our tent? Should anyone be excluded?

Do we let stereotypes, which never take into account the heart of the individual,

determine who we see as defiled and unclean?

Or do we look at the individual and see what their heart shows?

I hope that we truly work to not only avoid judging people

based on what’s on the outside, but also speak against those who do.

There are many ugly voices rising in the world today

that would have us judge others as less than, as defiled and unclean.

May we never forget that all, ALL, are created in the image of God,

and of equal worth to ourselves.

Ours is a tent that has no limits. May it be so. Amen.