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“Coming Clean”

Mark 1:21-27, 35-45 NRSV

[Jesus and the disciples] went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.... In the morning, while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he asked him, “Do you choose to make me clean?” Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

When my wife Barbara and I had been married about a week or so, we had one of the first fights of our marriage. We had gone to the grocery store together because we were out of several staples. Now this whole concept of what is and is not a staple is highly influenced by culture and context. In Hawaii, for example, it is rice is a staple for almost everyone, and it shows in the grocery store where there is an entire aisle of rice and much of it comes in 50 and 100 pound bags. Likewise in Hawaii for soy sauce (or as it’s called there, shoyu); I never knew there were so many kinds and people often

had half a dozen kinds in their pantries depending on the meal. And growing up in Texas, and then living in California, the grocery shelves were always well stocked with staples of Mexican-American culture – you could find, even at the gas stations, an abundance of kinds of tortillas.

But “staples” of the household diet or the household economy are also personal. And that’s what led to our fight. For you see, as many couples find out, what each one means by a certain word just isn’t what the other one means at all. *I* thought we needed to go to the store because we were out of the *staples* of tortilla chips, Fritos, peanut butter, and PopTarts. It turns out she thought we needed to go to the store because we needed a variety of cleaning supplies; that no household economy was complete without these items. So we went down the aisles, learning things about each other that we had never known, and which the pre-marital counseling hadn’t really focused on. She couldn’t understand why buying three kinds of chips was a staple. And I certainly couldn’t understand her view that having a number of cleaning products on-hand was a staple of the household’s goods. As she was selecting a cleaner for this and a spray for that, I said “What’s all this for!?! All you need is a bottle of generic Windex and some paper towels. That’ll take care of anything. And what it doesn’t take care of, you just hide it. Or you make sure you clean at night; that way it goes faster.”

Well, of course, she was right and I was wrong. And household staples do indeed need to include the things that make it easy to keep things clean. There is a certain warranted pride one can and should take in cleanliness and in the fact that such cleanliness is in fact a way of being hospitable, a way of offering your acceptance to others, a way of showing your respect for them and your own desire to be accepted in turn. In fact, I daresay that since the dawn of humanity, there has been a deep connection in the human psyche between being clean and being accepted and worthy of being part of the community. And that, when all is said and done, is in fact what the

cleanliness and dietary laws of the Old Testament are about – they are a testimony to the understanding that cleanliness is not something superficial, not something that is a luxury, but something that is closely tied with our need for community.

Now, that's very abstract. Let me unpack it a little. To do so, let's ask: why are so many television commercials so successful when they talk about how you might commit a terrible thing if you don't use this kind of detergent, or why it is utterly crucial to your life's well being that you use that kind of deodorant? I remember growing up with those annoying "Ring Around the Collar" commercials that seemed to promise humiliation at the prospect of some rude person coming up to you in public and pointing out your yellowed collar. Such commercials, and their more modern day ilk, operate on fear – the fear that without this or that product you will miss out on life's most meaningful relationships or your life will be less than it could be for want of a certain bar of soap or a certain brand of deodorant or a certain kind of cleaner. And while we may laugh at when put this way, advertisers keep using this tactic – because it works. Such commercials are effective precisely because they do call to something very deep inside of each of us – our desire for meaningful relationships, our desire for a life lived well in a community of good folks, our desire to believe that we are valued and valuable in the sight of others, and our deep, deep fear that we'll get "found out": that people will find out that we're "really" unlovable. Those desires and those fears – and their association with cleanliness – run very deep in the human psyche.

Looked at this way, we really ought not be puzzled by the Old Testament's view that cleanliness and holiness are intimately related. For while it is true that the cleanliness laws – about food and disease – can be explained by their function in being able to keep a small, wandering, community without refrigeration or modern medicine from getting sick, that's not explanation enough. What we have to see is that for those ancient Hebrews being clean was also a way of honoring God and of being found

worthy of associating with those whom God had also created. And, likewise, to be unclean was to be outside that web of relationships that makes us who we are. And so if one was regarded as “unclean” with, say, leprosy (a term that covered, we now know, a whole variety of things) then one was removed from the community, one was outcast, one was cut off. But here’s where it gets interesting: the ancient Hebrew people also used the concept of “unclean” to apply to those who did unethical or immoral things, and who thereby also put themselves outside of the community. Yet is that so different from us? Our own language runs deep with the association between “clean” and “ethical”: we say things like “I would feel dirty doing that” or “that was a dirty thing to do” or “he did her dirty.” So, like the ancient Hebrew people, we too find that we apply this idea of “clean” not just to appearances but also to behavior, to judging the worthiness of being associated with the community.

So, to begin to bring all this to our scripture’s topic this morning, this is the kind of background we need to keep in mind to really hear and understand the story of the cleansing of the leper. Now, as with any miracle story in the New Testament, we could ask a lot of questions that finally aren’t really to the point: what, for example, medically was the man’s problem? Or how, exactly, physiologically, was the healing done? But those are not the questions the story is concerned with; rather the story was preserved because it speaks to these questions that run very deep in each one of us: what keeps us from being involved with others in significant ways, what makes us feel shut out from those around us, what can be done about it? What makes, in this sense, a person “unclean” – and what is God’s response to our sometimes “uncleanliness”?

There are, I think, three things that this story of Jesus and the lepers can teach us about our lives. The first is that to be cleansed, to be healed, we must be honest with ourselves and others about the fact that we have been “unclean” or that we have

done something “dirty.” Those lepers who encountered Jesus were following the code described in Leviticus; they were wearing torn clothing and they had to announce their uncleanness wherever they went. This is serious business. In the Hebrew tradition, to wear intentionally torn clothing was a sign that you were in mourning. And while the announcing of your status was a way of protecting the community – sort of like quarantine laws – it is also an honest acknowledgment, a confession of one’s state that must happen before healing is even possible. When we lived in Indiana, I was occasionally a camp counselor for our Region’s church camps. One summer I counseled at the camp for nine- and ten-year-olds. By Wednesday of the week, all the counselors noticed something: while all the girls had been taking showers every night or morning, not a single boy had. And they stank. So on Wednesday we had a compulsory shower for all the boys. The response of most of them was “Why? I’m not dirty?”

Well, they were. Honest acknowledgment about those unclean places in our lives is the first step to being renewed and healed. For we have all sinned at times and fallen short. We all sometimes lose our tempers too quickly. We all sometimes think of ourselves more highly than we ought. We all have failed to speak when we should have said something. We all sometimes carry our hurts and grudges from the past like badges of honor. We all have done things that are not very loving sometimes. We have all failed to imagine what an event was like from another person’s perspective, to “walk a mile in their shoes.” And so the first point of the story, again, is this: we must acknowledge our condition, we must be honest with ourselves and our God.

And the second point of this story is simple; the second lesson from this story is one that we need to make sure that we hear and don’t ever discount. It is a point that ought to stop us, as well, from thinking that we are more unclean than we are. The

point, the lesson is this: God never, ever wants you or me to be isolated or outcast or feeling like we are not worthy of being loved. Did you notice what the story said concerning Jesus' motivation, his reason for healing the leper was? It simply said that Jesus was "moved with compassion." That tells us something very important about God – God never wants us to be uncleaned, unloved, cast out. God never wants us thinking that the things we have done are too terrible to merit God's love. I am sometimes prone – does this describe you? – to focusing on and even over-exaggerating the things that I have done that I'm not proud of, or that I wish I'd done better, or even that I'm ashamed of. And I fear being found out, and that very fear makes me over-focus more and more on those things that give me a sense of "uncleanliness." And yet while it is important to acknowledge those things, as I said, it is also important not to become so obsessed with them that you leave no room for God to be "moved with compassion" toward you, no room for God to work a miracle of healing and wholeness. Because Jesus healed that leper – and God is always seeking to heal and cleanse us – because God is filled with compassion. That's the kind of God that God is – one who is moved with compassion whenever something about our lives or our actions has left us unclean or outcast (even in our own minds) or feeling unworthy of love. God doesn't rest until we are healed.

There's a third and final point, a third and final lesson we can draw from this story. To be able to honestly acknowledged one's failings and one's sense of "uncleanliness" an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect is utterly essential. We need to know that what we acknowledge today will not be used as a weapon against us tomorrow. As individuals and as a church, we should always be gentle with each other's frailties and honoring of each other's honesty. In Romans 12, the Apostle Paul offers a list of traits that he says that we as individuals and as a church should always

be aiming for. But it's not an easy list to always live up to, is it? For some folks, it is a hard thing to not respond to unkind words with other unkind words. For others, Paul's very difficult instruction to bless those who seem to be persecuting you is the one that comes hard. For yet others it Paul's command that we are to show hospitality to everyone, even those who are very, very different from us that we have trouble with. The church is precisely the place where we should be able to get help with truly "coming clean" about where we have failings and foibles, about how we've not been able to live up to what God wants. But of course, that will only be possible in an atmosphere of gentle honesty, mutual regard, and mutual trust. And that's exactly the context that I would invite each one of us in our lives, in our families, in our church to continue to aim for and work for. Everyone needs a place in their lives where they can be honest, trusting that that honesty won't be betrayed. And God calls the church to be ever better at being that kind of place. It doesn't mean that we won't sometimes disagree, it doesn't mean that we sometimes won't find ourselves having honest disagreements with one another over things that matter; but it does mean that we will continue to be a community that honors the gifts and perspectives of everyone by trying very hard not to misinterpret one another, trying very hard never to attribute bad motives to one another, trying very hard to assume the best and never the worst. Those are the things that the leper received from Jesus – the honoring of his honesty and a tender care of his acknowledgment of his uncleanness. That can be our example and our continuing goal as well.

The upcoming church season of Lent can be a time for focus, for being honest about where we fall short, our "uncleanliness" as it were, and a time to ever re-commit ourselves to being a community that cherishes one another for the sake of what we can do together for those who need to know the Gospel. Bt we can do so precisely because we worship a God who is always motivated by compassion, by a desire that no

one be or feel outcast and that every life be lived well and beautifully.¹ For that very good news, thanks be to God!

¹This sermon is based, in part, on one given at First Christian Church, Monahans, Texas, March 20, 1988. Rev. Barbara Blaisdell and I worked together on that sermon which she also then preached at Trinity Christian Church, Kermit, Texas. I am grateful for her insights, as always!