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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 8, Series B
Saturday, June 26th, 2021
Sunday, June 27th, 2021

Sermon: No Longer Unclean
Texts: Mark 5:21-43

Focus: Jesus makes us holy.

Function: That they would not live in shame over their sin—or shame others for theirs.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: "...But the Holy Spirit has... sanctified me..." (SC, 3rd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen! "Cleanliness is next to godliness." At least, that's what they used to say. During the Victorian era, many moralistic preachers used this phrase to indicate that clean living—and a clean body—are essential aspects of the Christian life. Nobody knows exactly who first uttered the phrase, but in a sermon given in 1791, the Methodist founder, John Wesley, for the first time in print, wrote: "Cleanliness, indeed, is next to godliness." Wesley might have been the first, but he wasn't the last to make the assertion that holiness and hygiene are two sides of the same coin.

A Jewish priest in the first century would have approved of this saying. Personal hygiene and ceremonial purity were inseparably linked

in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. The Law of Moses organized all aspects of life into categories of holy and common (profane), clean and unclean (Lev. 10:10). Holy things were only for holy use in the sacrificial worship of the tabernacle and temple. The vessels and foods used for offerings and sacrifice could only be handled by holy *people*—Levitical priests who had undergone the proper ceremonial washings and wore the appropriate attire and liturgical vestments. It was impermissible, indeed *verboten*, to use ordinary, common dishes and housewares for temple service. Similarly, nobody would ever presume to use the holy things from the temple for an ordinary meal.

Clean and unclean mostly had to do with ordinary, everyday life outside the temple. Clean foods and clean dishes were approved for daily use by the people of God. Unclean foods (such as pork, reptiles, and shellfish) were off the menu (as I explained a few weeks ago in a sermon on Acts 10).¹ Unclean dishes could not be used (and unclean didn't just mean that there were crumbs or hummus left on the plate). Any dish that touched an unclean food automatically became unclean.

¹ See Chris Matthis, "Peter's Dream," sermon preached for Easter 6B at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado, on Sunday, May 9th, 2021.

So if a mouse, a lizard—or even a fly—touched your plate, it became unclean, and the dish had to be broken. If a fly or wasp fell into your cup, it had to be broken and thrown away (Lev. 11:33). For to eat from an unclean vessel was to make oneself unclean.

Unclean people were cut off from public life. They were not permitted to go to worship in the synagogue or to offer sacrifice in the temple because God could not permit anyone unclean in his presence. They could not go to the market or have any dealings with other people. Unclean *people* were literally beyond reach—untouchables.

Many activities or accidents could make somebody temporarily unclean, including touching a dead body (Lev. 21:10ff) or eating from an unclean plate (Lev. 11:29ff). A man who had a nocturnal emission became unclean, as did a woman during her menstrual period. However, some terrible diseases made people *permanently* unclean until their disease was healed, and they were banished from the company of others.

Lepers were a particularly offensive kind of unclean person. Anyone with blotchy skin, a rash, or an oozing sore was considered leprous and had to stay outside the city limits. As a sign and warning to

others not to come near, the leper had to wear torn clothes and leave his or her hair uncombed. And if anyone got too close, he or she had to cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” (Lev. 13:45, ESV).² Even his own family had to keep away from him. “He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp” (Lev. 13:46). In essence, lepers were under permanent quarantine—unless, by some miracle, their disease was cured. It was a terrible, lonely life.

We might regard this as a particularly inhumane way of dealing with people who were sick. After all, without a cure, how could anybody care for them or take care of them? Yet without modern medicines, what else could they do to contain a contagion and halt transmission of disease? (For example, Hansen’s disease, which is the medical terminology for the kind of leprosy once common in India, is easily treated today with antibiotics). As you might expect, most people who remained chronically unclean lived as beggars on the fringes of society.

² All Scriptures, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Yet for us to imagine that we are somehow morally superior to the ancients is hypocritical. Think about the horrible way that HIV patients were treated in the 1980's at the dawn of the AIDS epidemic. Many Americans wouldn't even shake hands with an HIV patient, let alone share a public toilet or drinking fountain. "Unclean! Unclean!" Hysteria ran high, and HIV became the "leprosy" of the late twentieth century. AIDS patients were shunned from society. Not until we discovered that it was primarily a blood borne disease did our society settle down and treat them like human beings again. (*Aside: Now think about how we treated people with covid during the pandemic. Is it that different?*)

Another notable type of unclean person turns up in our Gospel lesson today: the woman with the flow of blood. According to Leviticus 15, anyone with a bodily discharge, such as blood, pus, or semen, was unclean. And for a woman who continued to bleed beyond her normal period, "all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness" (Lev. 15:25). Anybody who touched such a woman would become unclean. Anything she wore, ate, or sat or lied down on would

become unclean. And anybody who touched her body, clothing, dishes, or furniture would likewise become unclean.

Yet, when the bleeding stopped, the poor woman could count out seven days and then become clean again. And the next day (the eighth day) she would have to offer two doves or pigeons as sacrifice. “And the priest shall make atonement for her before the LORD for her discharge” (Lev. 15:30). Like we said earlier: cleanliness is next to godliness.

So imagine the terrible plight of the woman with the flow of blood in our Gospel lesson. She had a flow of blood for over *twelve years!* And besides the physical pain and embarrassment of her condition, it also rendered her ceremonially unclean—cut off from the company of other people.

At one time she had been a woman of means, but now she “had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse” (Mark 5:26). The woman faced medical bankruptcy, and these were the days long before medical insurance or Chapter 11. She had no safety net. And she was no better

—indeed, *worse*—than before her treatments began. And during that entire time of her illness, she had to remain alone.

Can you imagine what it would be like to be locked up in your home alone for twelve *years*? I know that some of you had to undergo a strict 14-day quarantine at some point during covid. (I had to do it twice!). And nearly all of us were cooped up for most of the early months of the pandemic. But at least you had your family with you. And you could still go the grocery store or get your car an oil change.

But not this woman. Nevertheless, when this woman heard that Jesus was in town, she couldn't be caged up anymore. She'd heard the reports about Jesus, and if the rumors were true, then he was her final hope and last resort. "If I touch even his garments," she reasoned, "I will be made well" (Mark 5:28). So she flew the coop and entered the crowd in search of Jesus. Now remember: *anybody* and *anything* she touched became unclean. Imagine how many people she came into contact with as she bumped and jostled her way through the crowd to get to Jesus.

And lo! Miracle of miracles, as soon as she touched Jesus' cloak, her blood dried up and she was healed. She was *immediately* made well.³

And Jesus felt it too. "Who touched me?" he asked, sensing that power had gone out from him. His disciples laughed at him. "Who *hasn't* touched you, Jesus? You're the center of a huge crowd."

But he saw the woman, and she fell at his feet like a criminal pleading her case. After all, as an unclean woman, she had made nearly everybody in the crowd unclean.

But not Jesus. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Holy One of Israel, could not be made unclean. Uncleanness wasn't catching to him. He was (and is) the holiest man ever to live—the incarnate Son of God—the one of whom the angels sang, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). The poor woman couldn't make Jesus unclean, for he radiated holiness. Power went out from *him!* His very being and presence sanctify those who believe and trust in him. And believe she did.

³ "Immediately" (Greek: *euthus*), is one of Mark's favorite words.

Jesus called her “Daughter,” gently extending grace and mercy to her. “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (Mark 5:34). The woman trusted in Jesus to heal her and make her clean, and so he did. He healed her and sent her in peace—back into community, back among the living.

But there is a curious thing about that phrase, “Daughter, your faith has made you well.” The Greek word used for “make well” is *sōdzō*, the same verb used in the New Testament for salvation. It’s the same verb used in John 3:17 when the apostle writes that God sent his Son into the world to *save* the world.

Now sometimes in the New Testament, as in this story, *sōdzō* can be used for physical healing. But it’s not a common word for healing. Greek has other, more common, more frequent verbs for that (e.g., *iaomai* and *therapeuō*). So something more than mere physical healing is going on here in our Gospel reading.

Jesus did not heal the woman to verify some kind of name-it-claim-it, word of faith, prosperity “gospel” like that of Joel Osteen or Joyce Meyers. No, Jesus came to do so much more than merely to heal

her body. He came also to save her soul. Jesus saves. It's what his name means, and it's what he does (cf. Matt. 1:21). Jesus saved this woman through the faith she received by hearing about Jesus. "She had heard the reports about Jesus" (5:27). Faith comes by hearing the message of Christ (Rom. 10:17). She heard the Word and believed, and so Jesus saved her.

The physical healing was just icing on the cake. The physical healing was a sign of the new creation brought about by the kingdom of God breaking into our world even now, as Jesus preached in his early ministry: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). She believed, and she was saved. "Daughter, your faith has *saved* you. Go into peace and be healthy without your suffering" (Mark 6:34, CSM).

Now let's reflect on what has happened here. By the end of the fifth chapter of Mark, Jesus has cleansed every kind of untouchable you could think of: a man with leprosy (1:40-45), a man with an unclean spirit (1:21-28), the man of the tombs (5:1-20) the woman with the flow of blood (5:25-34), and the corpse of Jairus's daughter, whom he raised

from the dead (5:1-24, 35-43). Everybody with whom Jesus came into contact had a chance to be made clean, to be forgiven, to be given life. God can allow no unclean person or thing in his presence. So instead of shunning them or driving them away, Jesus reaches out and *makes* them clean.

And that is what he does for us. We suffer from an uncleanness even worse than leprosy or HIV/AIDS. We suffer from the uncleanness of sin, which stains our hands, hearts, and minds. That is why David cries out in Psalm 51: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:10). Because even if the ritual washings of the Old Testament could make a person clean for a day or a week, they could never remove the indelible mark of sin.

Only one person can do that: Jesus. Only Jesus can blot out the stain that separates you from God and other people. Only Jesus can take the blame and shame. As God spoke through the prophet Isaiah: “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isa. 1:18).

So Jesus died on the cross *for you*, pouring out his blood in a beautiful stream that cleanses everything it touches. “The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). And in the waters of Holy Baptism, instituted by the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit washes away our sins and gives us faith to believe and trust in our Savior and Lord. When you are washed through the water and the Word, your body and spirit are made clean. You are made *holy* by the Holy Spirit. Through holy things you become a holy person—a son or daughter of the King. As a forgiven sinner, you are no longer unclean. Child, your faith has saved you; go into peace (cf. Mark 6:34). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.