

Grace & Peace from God our Father & our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen

Do you know what it's like to be unclean? I don't mean dirty, but rather unclean in the Old Testament sense of "unclean"?

When I was 29 I became unclean – full of *shame* and self-loathing, *shunned* by people I knew. All of this because of the *irrational fear* that the *life sucking depression* from which I suffered *might be contagious*. I was *hidden away* far from the world, where no one would see me.

My depression alone did not make me heighten my *awareness* of what being "unclean" means. A week after I arrived at the hospital I received a *new roommate*. Depressed like me, Steven had attempted suicide. ***I didn't know anything else, but I knew by the thick bandages around his wrists that he had failed to take his life.***

In group therapy the following day, Steven revealed why he had ***attempted to take his life because he had been diagnosed with AIDS***. This was in ***1992***. The AIDS epidemic was still relatively new; ***no effective treatments*** had yet emerged so it was a ***death sentence***, and a great deal of ***fear and uncertainty still surrounded the spread*** of the syndrome.

I knew the facts – AIDS could not be spread by casual contact, but only by the anaerobic exchange of infected bodily fluids. Nevertheless, ***even knowing that Steven's sickness could not be spread to me, fear and suspicion plagued my thoughts, and self-doubt filled my mind.*** I shared a bathroom with him. He shaved in the same sink that I used. ***What if he cut himself?***

I knew better, but ***I was afraid of touching Steven.***

Jesus confronts "unclean" this morning. The specter of "uncleanness" may have completely alluded our notice, because we simply aren't familiar with living in a world of the "clean" and "unclean." More likely, ***we are simply not aware of how the categories of "clean" & "unclean" dominated every part of life in the days when Jesus walked the roads and streets of Galilee and***

Judea.

Nevertheless, *awareness of “clean” and “unclean” plague people’s lives now as much as they did then.* It’s just that the categories have changed. They are just as debilitating, just as destructive, and just as unfounded as they were 2000 years ago.

But back to our gospel reading. Two different people expose Jesus to the uncleanness that has ruined their lives – *Jairus* and *the woman with the 12 year hemorrhage*. During a brief stroll, they expose *Jesus to two of the three main categories of the “unclean”*. The law regarded *three forms of uncleanness as serious enough* to exclude the infected person from society. *These were leprosy, uncleanness caused by bodily discharges, and impurity resulting from contact with the dead.*

Jairus – a leader of the synagogue – *comes to Jesus* – the outsider – for help when he realizes that *Jesus is the only hope for his daughter’s grave illness*. *Sadly, Jesus does not reach her in time* to save her.

Jesus is *delayed* by a desperate woman along the way, also looking to Jesus as her only hope, interrupts his transit by touching His cloak. *She is desperate enough and hopeful enough to risk breaking the law*. By *being in the crowd she already breaks the law* of the cleanliness code. *he breaks the law by touching Jesus*, since doing, makes Jesus unclean. *What always puzzles me* is Jesus’ reaction to the touch. *Why is Jesus so adamant about knowing who touched Him?* Why does Jesus care that power went out of Him? *Is He angry?* Does He feel cheated? *Slighted?* *The Jesus revealed in the gospels surely does not begrudge the woman the healing.* *So why the search for the person who touched Him?*

The answer is somewhat simpler and more complicated: Jesus desires to bring into community this woman, who up until this moment has been kept outside of the community because of her flow of blood – or unclean bodily discharge.

First, meeting the woman *makes the healing manifest*, clear, and publicly verified. *In meeting her Jesus declares her clean.*

Second, to Jesus *relationships within community are easily as important as physical healing itself*. *He publicly proclaims her clean, and clears the way for her to return to life in the community once more.* Indeed, Jesus does more than that; *by calling her “daughter,” Jesus makes it clear that she part of His family.*

Even as this occurs, *Jairus’ daughter dies*, and this is the reason the servants try to dissuade Jesus from journeying any further; going there, the rabbi would risk ritual defilement. Still, Jesus continues to Jairus’ home, where *He does the unthinkable*. I am *not referring to raising the dead girl* to life, though that certainly was unthinkable. **Rather**, I refer to the fact that *Jesus touches the dead girl*. He takes her hand, and in so doing *takes her uncleanness upon himself*.

But *something unexpected happens*. When Jesus touches the dead girl – the unclean thing – *the uncleanness is not transferred to Him*, but *rather Jesus’ life is transferred to the little girl*.

Just so, Jesus confrontation of the uncleanness of the woman with the hemorrhage – his bringing it into relationship through seeking out the one who touched him calling her daughter – makes that which is unclean clean again. *Brought into Jesus’ presence, that which is unclean is transformed into newness, wholeness, inclusion, and life.*

What of the unclean categories and contagions in our lives?

Those *behaviors and circumstances that separate us from others*, even our families: *addiction*, disabilities, *poverty*, homelessness, *mistakes we’ve made*, pride, *political opinions*. The same is true of all these things.

When we are willing in our desperation, our acknowledgement that these things are beyond our control to manage – to bring the sources of uncleanness to Jesus, He can take them and strip them of their power to isolate. Jesus can

take that which is unclean is transformed into newness, wholeness, inclusion, and life.

We are the Body of Christ – called to confront whatever contagion the world calls unclean and avoids at all cost, without fear or disapproval because we know Jesus has the power to remove every source of exclusion and shame. Like Jesus, we are called to welcome into our community those whom the world shames, shuns, fears, and seeks to hide or destroy.

We can bring the sources of uncleanness to Jesus where their power to shame is overcome by Jesus's forgiveness & acceptance – just as the uncleanness of Jesus' death on the cross is wiped away and cleansed by the resurrection. the power to shun overcome by a community that welcomes all understanding that in Christ we are all one; the shadowy power to frighten vanishes under the bright light of God's love and promise of eternal life; and the power to destroy loses its gravity next to God's power to create all things new.

We can bring our uncleanness to Jesus – no matter what it is – and when we place those things under Christ's control *He has the power to transform them and us.* To live a new life, in a new place, with a new people.

In my few days of knowing Steven *in that psych ward, I learned something.* Among those outside of social acceptance – “the unclean” – a level of acceptance and caring exists that I have rarely seen anywhere else. Together *we learned that Steven was more precious than his AIDS was isolating.* On his last day – when he left and I remained – Steven held me in embrace and told me he'd pray for me. And I did the unthinkable – *I hugged him and told him that I was fortunate to know him and call him friend.* Because in the end – as Jesus demonstrates this morning – *Steven was more than the uncleanness that invaded his life.* To Jesus and to those of us on Ward B, he was another precious child of God.

Amen !