

Jesus's Deep Clean

This is perhaps one of the strangest stories about Jesus in all of the Gospels. It's found only in the Gospels of Mark, which we read today, and in a slightly longer version in Matthew 15; it's absent from the Gospels of Luke and John. In many modern tellings of the story, the villain of the piece is actually our Lord. After all, he calls this poor woman who seeks nothing but deliverance for her daughter, a dog. He rebukes her. He insults her.

Now, as you know, especially if you follow Rachel's facebook account, we have a dog. His name is Theo. When Theo arrived in our home as a mere pup freshly weaned and very whiny, there were rules. The first rule was that his domain was the mud room. Otherwise, outside. He could come into other rooms of the house, but only with people. He did not have the run of the place. I don't think that rule lasted a week. The second rule was, he slept in his crate. And my daughter Sara was very good at teaching him this rule and enforcing this rule on the rest of us. But there came a time when the family was away and I was alone with the dog. And he looked so lonely. And the second rule bit the dust. All on me. The third rule was, he only ate his own food. No people food. Well, once he had the run of the house and slept at the foot of our bed, this one didn't seem to make sense. Today, he has claimed a chair, which he perches on at supper, waiting not too patiently for bits and pieces to be passed to him. We love our dog.

In the Middle East, however, even up to today, dogs are not beloved pets. Dogs are scavengers. Dogs are often feral. Dogs are disgusting. Some scholars try to soften Jesus's apparent insult here, rightly saying that the word for dog is better translated "little dog"—think a Pomeranian not a pit bull. And this little dog does, apparently, live in the house rather than scavenge at the dump. But still. In our house, we love Theo. And if I were to call a member of my family a dog, it would not be a compliment. How much more in a culture that really didn't like them? There's no way to get Jesus off the hook here. And I'm not sure we want to anyway.

Most of you know by now my deep conviction that we are not free to skip over or dismiss or pooh-pooh those parts of Holy Scripture that make us squirm. Those are precisely the parts where God deeply lurks and there is great reward in sitting with them for a while. So let's sit with this seemingly harsh and unwarranted rebuke for a while and ask just how it is Gospel—good news for us.

Clean and Unclean Continued

Let's begin by remembering the Gospel from last week. Do you remember it? The religious leaders confront Jesus over issues of cleanliness. Why do your disciples not wash your hands? This is not a request for information. This is an insult disguised as a question. Your disciples are unclean. You, their teacher, seemingly don't care. You are not, in fact, anyone of consequence because you teach your disciples to ignore cleanliness.

Now cleanliness is a big deal, both for Jesus, and for his critics. Cleanliness is a major theme in the Old Testament—their Bible. Cleanliness was a boundary defining issue. In the Law, to be "clean" was to be in covenant with God and to be a part of God's covenant people. To be unclean was to be outside of those relationships. And here's an important point: cleanliness is not always a moral category. Did you wake up with a skin disease? Unclean. Did you have to bury a loved one?

Unclean. Are you from an enemy country? Unclean. Did you just have a baby? Unclean. Sometimes actions beyond your control made you unclean. Sometimes necessary actions made you unclean. And rites and duties had to be observed in order to move from unclean to clean.

This is the shared context for Jesus and his critics. Cleanliness mattered. The disagreement was over how. Jesus's critics are fixated on the externals. They are so concerned about being clean that they add to the rules in the law. They are not doing anything wrong here, by the way. They are doing what we do all the time: figuring out how to apply the Scriptures to their daily lives. But something has gone wrong. They have become fixated on those rules to the degree that they miss the rules of the rules in the first place. The point of the rules was not the rules. The point of the rules was to mark out God's people as different from the surrounding nations. The point of the rules was that, if they were internalized, if they were written on the hearts and not just external observances, Israel would become a light to the nations. And they would, in the words of the prophet, lay hold of Jew, saying to them, "Let us go with you. For we have heard that God is with you." (Zech. 8:23).

So Jesus reminds them, it's not the externals that matter. It's what comes out of a person that makes them unclean. Evil thoughts—idolatry, adultery, all the bad stuff. The problem is in the heart. It's the heart that needs to be cleansed. Keeping our bodies clean is important, but it is a sign to a deeper cleansing that needs to take place. And until that deeper making clean happens, the mission to the Gentiles—which is the mission of all Israel, from the call of Abraham forward—cannot be completed until that cleansing happens.

Cleanliness is indeed next to godliness!

Jesus Goes to an Unclean Land

Now with that in mind, let's follow the flow of the story. Notice first of all that Jesus goes to an unclean land. That land—the region of Tyre and Sidon—is unclean simply because of geography. It is outside the boundaries of Israel. Jesus has been teaching and healing in the region of Galilee. And, as we have seen the crowds are pressing in on him. The miracle of the feeding of the 5000 is a key here. That miracle is so large, and so widely witnessed, that it seems to increase the crowds exponentially. (Just as an aside here, don't try to knit Mark and John together here. For John, this moment is the watershed when the crowds and disciples start to dwindle; for Mark, that moment comes later). So Jesus has to leave the land of his mission to the Jews to go to an unclean land, where, hopefully, nobody knows him.

Jesus leaves the ancient boundaries of Israel to the region of Syrophenicia. Syro refers to the fact that Jesus is leaving the Roman province of Judea for the Roman province of Syria. Phenicia is the region's ancient name. He is headed to the neighborhood of Tyre and Sidon. Not far away from Galilee. Only about 20 miles or so. But still, a line has been crossed. And not just geographically.

By naming the cities of Tyre and Sidon, Mark reminds his readers that Jesus has crossed from a place where the true God is worshipped to a place where false gods are home. Specifically the Ba'als that had ensnared the Israelites so often in the old Testament. Ba'al was a Canaanite god who looked after, basically, the land. And if you were a subsistence farmer, it was good to have the local Ba'al on your side. And Tyre was the home of Ba'al worship. It was the land from which this

false god came. Tyre, you might recall, was the home of the queen, Jezebel who married the king of Israel, Ahab, and who had infamous fights with the prophet Elijah. That's an important point that we'll revisit later.

For now, remembering Jezebel provides us with another reason for the land's uncleanness. It was unclean because it was outside the boundaries of Israel. It was unclean because it was the home of false gods. It was, third, unclean because it was the home of Israel's enemies. These people were not just foreigners or strangers, they were hostile to God's people. They were unclean.

Jesus goes to an unclean land.

Jesus Meets and Unclean Woman

There, Jesus meets an unclean woman. I hope you get now that unclean has nothing to do with personal hygiene. We have no indication that she is ill or slovenly or poor or any of those things. She is still unclean. She is unclean because of her identity. Matthew makes this point particularly clearly when he calls her not simply a Gentile (that's Mark's designation), but a Canaanite. He's not making a literal racial reference here, as though she belongs to one of those ancient tribes only brought forward in time. He's accentuating that, as a gentile, she is an enemy. She may be a very nice person (I happen to think she is). But she's a Canaanite! By virtue of her identity, she's an enemy. She is kin to Jezebel, the Queen who deceived Israel, who killed her prophets, who worshipped idols.

No wonder then that Jesus rebukes her. "It is not right for the children's bread to be thrown to the dogs!" In his rebuke, Jesus is standing squarely in the biblical tradition. She's unclean. She's outside. She's not one of us. She's a dog. If we could see the scene in our mind's eye, we need to imagine the disciples looking approvingly amongst themselves. "You tell her, Jesus." She's unclean after all. No doubt they thought that.

Whatever his feelings toward the woman, Jesus words here highlight her apparent uncleanness. Her status as one outside the community of faith. She is from the wrong place. She is from the wrong race. But is she really unclean?

When she appears on the scene, well, she complicates things. As soon as Jesus crossed into this unclean land, remember, after disputing with the religious leaders about cleanliness, she falls at Jesus's feet. What does this suggest? It suggests that unlike the critics, she knows who Jesus is. Perhaps she was one of those from Tyre and Sidon who were among the early crowds mentioned in Mark 3:8. Maybe she heard about Jesus from one of those people. Clearly, in this unclean land, anonymity for Jesus was not an option. He could not be hid. Even these unclean people by now knew about Jesus. And this so-called unclean woman gets it. She gets it in Mark's favorite word, "immediately." She falls down at Jesus feet. She worships him. She pays him homage. And she keeps on doing it. The language here is not of a single event, but of one who immediately and keeps on prostrating herself before the Lord. She knows who Jesus is. She knows if her little girl is going to be freed from this unclean spirit, he's the guy who can send the spirit packing.

After the rebuke, you might think this woman would gather herself and in some measure of self respect and give Jesus a piece of her mind. But she doesn't. She persists. She perseveres. She knows in her bones that he alone has the answer to her prayer and, despite seemingly being

rejected, she will not let go. “Even the dogs get to eat what falls from the children’s table.” She’s like the man whose friends have shown up late and so he goes to another friend to lend him food. And he keeps on asking until that friend gets out of bed and gives him the food he needs. She’s like that woman who, seeking justice, keeps pestering the judge until she gets the verdict she needs. She will not give up. Why not? Because rebuke or not, she knows to whom she speaks. She is not like one of the “clean” critics who want to spar with Jesus. She greets him with these words: “Yes, Lord.”

So we’re right to ask: is she unclean? She has every reason to be judged unclean—externally. But look at what comes out of her. She knows Jesus. She worships Jesus. She names Jesus Lord. She will stay with Jesus even if it looks like he rejects her. And here, Matthew in his version of the story says to her, “Woman, great is your faith.” She knew that. She didn’t need to hear it. This is a word to the disciples. Do you get it guys? She’s clean. She has faith. Listen to what comes out of her. Out of her comes words of worship. Out of her comes words of blessing. Out of her comes a desperate prayer directed to the right source. The law has been written on her heart.

She. Is. Clean.

Jesus Dispatches an Unclean Spirit

We don’t know when she was converted by the word, to use the language of James in last week’s lesson. But we know by her conduct that she welcomed it meekly, and that it has saved her soul. And, Jesus honors her prayer. “For this statement you may go. The demon has left your daughter.” And she went home. She didn’t ask for a sign. She didn’t expect extra proof. She had the word. And the word was enough. She went home to find her child made whole.

The miracle here needs a little thought before we wrap up. It is a miracle of exorcism. It is the removal of an unclean spirit—note the designation. Jesus heals diseases and raises the dead—these are miracles of healing. Jesus multiplies food and calms storms—these are miracles of creation. Jesus exorcises unclean spirits—these are miracles of cleansing. It’s in the name. We have been shaped by centuries of language use to ascribe to spiritual enemies more status than they perhaps deserve. Certainly, they are smarter than us, more powerful than us, and we are on our own at their mercy. But the New Testament consistently calls them unclean spirits. They are, in other words, spiritual vermin. A person afflicted with an unclean spirit is like a house with rats or roaches. That person, like that house, needs a good cleaning.

And Jesus, with a word, cleanses the little girl. There was an exorcism without an exorcism. No elaborate ritual. Not even a confrontation, as has happened already in the Gospels, where Jesus commands the unclean spirit directly to leave. No. Rather, we have an almost nonchalant, “For that, you may go. The demon has left your daughter.” Jesus cleanses with a word. With His Word. He dispatched an unclean spirit with a word and a wave and from a distance. The sign of the cleanliness of the mother is the cleansing of her little girl.

And we would have grasped none of this this morning had Jesus not said, “It is not right to throw the children’s bread to the dogs.”

What is the Point?

Jesus went to an unclean land. The land of the dogs. What did he find? He found a daughter. He found one of his own. One who had been converted by the word and welcomed with meekness the word that saved her soul. When was she made clean? No idea. Some tantalizing hints from Mark 3, but no real evidence. He found a woman who, based on her words, based on what came out from her, had been made clean by the saving word of the Son of God.

A desperate mother threw herself at the feet of the master, hoping for crumbs. She received instead a banquet. She received a child made whole. A daughter cleansed from an unclean spirit.

And finally, through all of it, the disciples were given an object lesson on how to assess cleanliness. Cleanliness is not about robotically observing all the rules so that we can impress God with our scruples on judgment day. Cleanliness is about being transformed by an encounter with Jesus. Cleanliness is about recognizing who Jesus is, even when it seems like he is far away or frowning on us. Cleanliness is persisting in prayer.

Now, here's the really good news: the children's bread really is offered to the dogs. To the gentiles. To us. Jesus doesn't just give us the crumbs. He gives us—gentiles!—himself. And in so doing, he makes us clean.