

“Unclean and Untouchable”

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Text: Mark 5:25-39

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Clifford was the new kid in our third grade class. I can see him now as clearly as when Mrs. Easlinger introduced him to the class – standing at the front of the room with his hands in his pockets, ears that stuck way out, thick glasses to help with an eye that was crooked. His hair was kinda greasy and if you got very close to him, well, he had a distinctive odor. Instantly everyone of us in Mrs. Easlinger’s third grade class knew that Clifford was doomed to be an outcast. Don’t ask me why, there were other kids who wore glasses and plenty of us whose personal hygiene left something to be desired. But for whatever reason, with that mysterious non-verbal communication that kids have, the pack judged Clifford and found him wanting. He wasn’t one of us and never would be. He sat alone at lunch. He stood alone at recess. No one ever joked with him in the hallway or passed him notes during class, or asked him over to play after school. If he accidentally brushed up against one of the girls, she would make a gagging sound and yell that he had given her “cooties.” The rest of us would laugh and Clifford would walk away silent and red-faced. As a child, I never thought except in fleeting, shameful moments of what it must have been like to be Clifford. To be an outcast, alone, virtually unclean. As an adult looking back, I can only begin to guess the damage that must have been done to his spirit.

Clifford could have identified with the woman with the hemorrhage described in our gospel lesson. She too was an outcast. She too was viewed by those around her as having “cooties.” This woman had had a flow of blood for twelve years. We don’t really know the exact nature of her problem. It might have been a wound that refused to heal – with a constant trickle of blood. Maybe it was a skin ulcer, oozing pus and blood. Or maybe it was what we sometimes call “female problems” – a constant menstrual flow.

Whatever it was, it was chronic. This woman apparently bounced from doctor to doctor, seeking relief from her condition, and emptying her bank account in the process. Now her problem is not simply the pain and discomfort from her hemorrhaging. Listen to the words from Leviticus that condemn her to be an outcast:

If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her menstruation, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her menstruation, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean. Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge shall be treated as the bed of her impurity; and everything on which she sits shall be unclean. Whoever touches these things shall be unclean . . . (Leviticus 15:25-27).

Unclean. As long as she has the hemorrhage, this woman is unclean. Everything and everyone that she touches is unclean. Religiously and socially she is an outcast. Wherever she walks, wherever she sits down, wherever she sleeps is considered impure and dirty. If she touches another person, that person becomes unclean, and must undergo ritual purification.

I wonder how often had the woman seen children scurry away at the sight of her? How often had other adults turned their backs or looked at her as though she were a cockroach or a snake or crossed the street to avoid her. How often had this woman heard people muttering a curse under their breath or making some disparaging comment to their companions? How often had the women repeated to herself an adage her parents had taught her as a child to ward off the taunts of others. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” How often had that phrase no matter how boldly she spoke it, failed to stop the bleeding in her heart, the sorrow of being rejected by the community?

No wonder she was desperate. She had heard of Jesus, and the miracles He had performed. Can you see her as she pushes through the crowd around Him, hoping and praying and half-sobbing in her anxiety to reach this miracle worker who is her last, desperate hope? The accumulated burden of rejections, taunts, pain, and hostility probably weighed her down as she approached Jesus. It was not just her physical condition; it was her soul that needed healing as much as her body. She hungered for the restoration of hearing and knowing, Yes! I am a human being. Yes! I am precious in the eyes of God. Yes! I am worthy of being a full member of the community. Yes! I am a person capable of receiving and giving love. Yes! I matter in the eternal scheme of all things. Yes! I have dreams as holy and good as any other human being. Yes! I want to be

touched and to touch others and not to have them flinch back but draw closer. Yes! God knows I am a creature shaped by God's own hand and filled with breath from God's own breath. Yes! God looks at me and says Yes! Yes! Yes!

That's why the woman approached Jesus. But she is too spiritually broken and feeling too unclean to even look Jesus in the face. She can't face one more rejection. Instead, she reaches out as Jesus hurries by, and her fingers brush the fringes of his cloak and immediately the bleeding stops and she feels healed. Jesus, feeling her touch, calls the woman to him and hears her story. He sends her back to rejoin the human community when He tells her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well."

She is now no longer ritually unclean, she is saved from that which made her an outcast in her own community. For the first time in twelve years – twelve years! – she can take a friend's hand, or pick up a child, or embrace her husband. Now all that fuss over a flow of blood strikes us as odd and maybe even inhumane, but it was the custom of her time. When she was most in need of love and care and support, this woman was cut off from everything and everyone who could have given it to her.

Yet perhaps her experience isn't so isolated. Like poor little Clifford, we have our outcasts too. Maybe we have even felt like an outcast.

This past week I was reading portions of William Mahedy's book *Out of the Night: The Spiritual Journey of Vietnam Vets*. In a chapter about vets returning from Vietnam, Mahedy writes:

Vets who hadn't yet been able to change from uniform to civilian clothes were often spat upon by strangers during their first hours home. A short haircut or any other indication of veteran status could – and often did – lead to spitting, that ancient and honored mode of reviling the despised among us.

He then proceeds to tell the story of a returning woman soldier trying to get from an airbase to San Francisco International airport. Wearing her uniform she watched drivers whiz by her, some slowing only to make obscene gestures or yell insults. One driver threw a carton of trash. The woman had served as a nurse and had looked into the agonized faces of so many dying men. She now found herself the object of "the look" directed at her by passing drivers. She recalls "The look would start around the eyes as if they were peering right through me. Their faces would harden into stone. I was a pariah, a nonperson so low that they believed they could squash me underfoot; I was untouchable – I was unpopular as a disease." Unclean, that's how she felt. Unclean.

That's how a gay man in McPherson felt. Larry was a member of the congregation I served. Larry had AIDS. He used to send me letters expressing his frustration and anger over those occasions when either his homosexuality or his disease became a barrier between himself and someone else. He once wrote: "When is this society going to learn to accept instead of discriminate? We are people just like anyone else. If everyone was exactly the same, what a dull world this would be. I need to see that I'm okay, that I do have self worth."

Many gay and lesbian persons fear that disclosing their sexual orientation to friends and family will result in rejection.

Tex Sample who taught sociology of religion at St. Paul's Seminary in Kansas City tells the story of one gay man disclosing his sexual orientation to his parents. The man said that when he told his father and mother that he was homosexual, his father without a word got up and went to the closet where he kept his handgun. He took the handgun down, loaded it, and placed it on the table next to his son. Then the father turned to the mother and said, "Let's leave our son alone now. He knows what he should do." How do you suppose that man felt – rejected, outcast, unclean.

Or how about the perfect couple who can't keep up the pretense of being perfect anymore and get a divorce. Now no one knows quite what to say. Friends feel angry, let down. Just when the divorcing couple needs them the most, their friends pull away. It's as if the divorce makes them unclean.

Or the person who has lost their spouse. All their friends were couples. They did things together as couples. But now the phone doesn't ring and the surviving spouse sits at home feeling unwanted and unnecessary – like a third wheel. Unclean.

Unclean – someone who has been charged with a crime. Someone who is recovering from alcohol or drug abuse. Someone who carries their worldly possessions in a black garbage bag. Some one who suffers from a mental illness.

Do we in the church ever participate in structures that cast people out? Make them feel unwelcome, unwanted, unclean? You don't dress the right way. You aren't welcome here. Your theology isn't quite right. You aren't welcome here. You're too pushy, you want to change things too much. You aren't welcome here. People of color, people with different sexual orientation make us uncomfortable. You really aren't welcome here.

When Christ was touched by the woman with the hemorrhage, He didn't recoil in horror. He didn't rush off to the temple in order to undergo the ritual cleansing. He reached out to her. He talked to her. He heard her story. He welcomed her, and made her whole. And that's what Christ's church must do as well.

Because none of us are perfect. All of us need to be saved and if we start saying who gets in and who doesn't, we may find ourselves on the wrong side of the church door. I suspect that deep within all of us there's a part of us that we feel is unclean. Maybe it's the little child that lives deep within us that was told over and over that they would never amount to anything. Maybe we feel like a failure at our jobs or at marriages, or families, or just at life. Maybe there's some secret sin or failing, some broken relationship that is nagging at us, keeping us from wholeness. Maybe we feel like no one, even God, can accept that part of us. It's too dark and dirty. It's too unclean. And we feel like singing that old song, "Dirty me, Dirty me! I'm disgusted with myself!"

Yet it's precisely that unclean part of us that can be made clean. As Martin Luther said, "God can carve the rotten wood and ride the lame horse." It is precisely that unclean part of us that Christ came to make clean. It is precisely that untouchable part of us that Christ came to touch, to heal, to make well, to save. To say to us as He said to that woman, cured of her disease: "Your faith has made you well. Go in peace."

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