

“Would You Kiss a Dirty Pig?”

Neil Engle
October 14, 2007
Text: Luke 17:11-19

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

I want to mention a few names to you – see what comes to mind when you hear these names. What will people remember about these individuals?

Britney Spears
Senator Larry Craig
Barry Bonds
Olympic medal winner Marion Jones
Michael Vick

And here's one to test the memory of some of our older members – Charles Van Doren, the man caught in the quiz show scandal of the 50's.

How long would we want others to remember something wrong we've done? How long does one have to be reminded of one's sins? In *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean is imprisoned for 19 years for stealing bread. When he is released, he carries with him his yellow ticket to show he's an ex-convict. And his convict #24601 is branded on his chest.

Some would say we deserve what we get – if we can't do the time, then don't do the crime. If you don't want your name and reputation forever tarnished, don't engage in questionable behavior. But what if you're not guilty of unsavory conduct? If what happens isn't your fault, should you have to endure public embarrassment and be the object of shame?

Should a physical condition or ailment warrant the same kind of treatment? That's what we have in the scripture selection. It's the story of the healing of the ten lepers and it is found only in Luke. We need to remember that in the Palestine of Jesus, it was accepted that illness and disability were God's punishment for wrong doing. If you were sick or disabled and blind then you or your family were guilty of something. Many religious and social boundaries existed to counter contagion and the fear of it; to protect and separate the holy from the unholy, the clean from those who were considered to be unclean.

Lepers – those who suffered from leprosy – tended to live in groups. They avoided contact with non-lepers, but they kept close enough to populated areas to receive charity. Lepers were so stigmatized in that culture that they had to walk around announcing to everyone that they were “unclean, unclean.” In other words, lepers were supposed to keep their distance when others approached and shout to them “Unclean. Unclean.” What would that have been like? How would that feel? Can you imagine – looking down the road – seeing a friendly face – and even before you're given the opportunity to speak – before that friendly face has had a chance to find out what a great person you are on the inside – you have to tell them there's something wrong with you – that they'd better be on their guard – “Unclean. Unclean.”

Does that happen today? I think it does. Sometimes for good reason. We register sex offenders to put the public on notice of the potential danger and try to prevent future abuse. “Unclean. Unclean.” But there are those in our society who would require shouts of “unclean” from anyone who doesn't fit their view of normal. Some would slap warning labels on people with severe mental illnesses, or persons who are HIV positive or who have AIDS, people who are illegal immigrants, people who are gay or lesbian, people who have served time in prison. Some would deny these groups compassion and turn a deaf ear when they ask for help.

In the case of Jesus – all He needed to hear was the cry – “Master have mercy on us.” Into a superstitious and fearful culture, Jesus came and touched lepers – bringing an image of holiness restricted not by what was considered to be unclean, impure or sinful, but by bending close to it.

If we look closely at this story, we find that it's really a two-part story. The first part is a healing story – the healing of ten lepers. And the second part of the story is the story of the salvation of a foreigner. Notice, it's the foreigner, the Samaritan, who returns – who praises God and who expresses gratitude to Jesus. Now when Jesus says to the Samaritan – “Your faith has made you well” – the blessing certainly refers to some benefit other than that which all, including the other nine, had received earlier. The verb translated “made well” is the same word often translated “to be saved.” What we have here, then, is a healing-salvation story. Ten lepers are physically healed, but only one is saved – only one sees Jesus with his heart – only one gives gratitude to God.

Now when you hear or read this story, do you ever wonder why it's the foreigner who turns out to be the good guy? That doesn't really fit our way of thinking, does it? Think about – in television or movies – the foreigners are often not the good guys – but the bad guys – Middle East terrorists, Asian gang leaders, South American drug lords. Remember the Oklahoma City bombing, and how badly we wanted to blame a foreign individual or terrorist group? Foreigners or strangers – many of us are uncomfortable with them. Besides, sometimes strangers embrace things we have taken for granted. The immigrant who's granted citizenship and knows more about the United States Constitution than we do, the stranger in church who sings heartily the hymns we have long left to the choir, who expresses gratitude for blessings we had not noticed. Ever been with a stranger or new Christian who listened attentively to the sermon we thought we'd already heard, who was excited about our old Bible? We may wonder about or resent the stranger who becomes actively involved in acts of service to which we send small donations. Let's face it, sometimes we don't like foreigners.

And here in this scripture passage, we've got a foreigner who is a leper – he's got two strikes against him. He's like the guy who goes to the doctor and says, "Doc – what's wrong with me?" The doctor says, "You're very ill." The man says, "I think I need a second opinion." The doctor says, "Okay – you're also ugly." The leper was a foreigner – no one wanted to touch him with a ten-foot pole.

A few years ago, a Canadian artist, Bob Haverluck, drew a cartoon of Jesus kissing a pig. It shows Jesus on His knees in front of a large dirty pig, smooching it right on the kisser. To the right of the pig, a square-jawed 21st century man seems to be calling for someone to get both Jesus and the pig out of there, out of the frame, out of his frame of reference. The cartoon's caption reads, "Jesus kisses the unclean. The protectors of morality and might are outraged."

The lepers and the pig are unclean. Jesus heals the lepers and kisses the pig anyway. In order to kiss the pig, Jesus had to be in the pig pen. In order to heal the lepers He had to be where they could call out to Him. Only one leper comes back to say thanks – the one who's the most like the pig – the most unclean, the foreigner. He's the only one who responds to the relationship Jesus initiated.

When Jesus kisses the pig, the pig doesn't turn into a princess – or a radiantly clean stained glass disciple. The dirty pig stays a dirty pig. In the same way, the foreigner – the Samaritan – doesn't convert and Jesus doesn't ask him to. The grateful leper isn't invited to join the disciples. He is told to go on his way. The leper remains a foreigner – whose faith has made him whole.

Wherever we are, whoever we are – Jesus can and does respond to our cry for help. "Lord, have mercy on us," is where we begin in our journey of salvation – we want to be made well if we want to be made whole – we want to be saved. Seeing Jesus with our hearts doesn't make us into idealized versions of ourselves. But it does give us a chance to be whoever we are – foreigners, dirty pigs, or human beings longing to be kissed by love.

Hear these words by Walter Murray:

The healing touch

I know that you are wounded
in many a hidden place.
I know that you are hurting,
I see it in your face.
I know that you need healing
which comes from God as Grace.
A birth that never happened,
a lover who has lied,
A child that left in anger,
a friend who turned aside,
A goal that once you longed for
has fallen with your pride,
A joy that once brimmed over
has gone out with the tide,
A smile that used to greet me
has crawled within to hide,

A faith that gave direction
no longer can decide,
A trust that once shone brightly
has shattered far and wide,
A voice that once spoke gently
has learned how to deride,
A crippling fear has grasped you
and left its scars inside,
A guilt has left you shaken
no matter what you tried,
A loss has left you saddened
no matter how you cried,
A grief has come and taken
a loved one from your side,
A songbird that sang freely
has closed its eyes and died.
Yes, I know that you are wounded,
but that scarcely makes me wise.
For I see that I am hurting
in the mirror of your eyes.
Thus, our hope is bound together,
for the mirror never lies!
So, let us walk together
when the pain becomes too much.
Yes, come and walk beside me please,
but not as lifeless crutch.
But come as Christ's scarred fingers now,
and share the healing touch.

Let us pray: O Master, we are all in need of some type of healing – body, mind, or spirit. Have mercy on us – touch us and make us whole. Amen.