

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, February 1, 2015

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak — that prophet shall die."

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching — with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Let us pray...Amen.

This morning's Gospel lesson recounts the story of Jesus, teaching in the synagogue. Something about his teaching was authentic, those that were there recognized that he didn't teach like the scribes did. There was an observable difference in the way Jesus taught, and those who heard it, knew it.

While teaching, a man described as having an unclean spirit interrupted. Jesus commanded the spirit to come out of the man, and it obeyed. It was an impressive act, and word began to spread about the teaching and the healing that Jesus was sharing with the people.

Now, it's difficult to grasp what has taken place. In our modern understanding, what used to be thought of as an unclean spirit is now considered mental illness. But it's more than that. This isn't just Jesus, in the synagogue, healing a person with mental illness.

Those who practiced Judaism in those days had a heightened sense of ritual cleanliness. There were many laws that governed who was clean, and who was unclean. Laws over what could be eaten, how the food was to be prepared, who could enter the temple or synagogue, what they needed to do in order to be cleansed, so that they could return to the temple and worship...

Jesus started the process of abolishing those kinds of laws, and the early church completed it by allowing Gentiles to be Christians, without first being Jewish.

So the religious and cultural impact on being ritually clean is mostly lost on us 21st century Christians. Our Jewish sisters and brothers, more or less, depending on how conservative their faith is, practice some level of ritual

cleanliness. The same is true for our sisters and brothers who practice the Islamic faith.

Kosher laws, and the ritual laws applied to women remain, depending on the congregation. Muslim worshipers are expected to remove their shoes, to be ritually clean before worshiping.

Ritual cleanliness is a dimension that is mostly absent from our experience, except perhaps for our concept of baptism, where we ritually cleanse a child, or person, and prepare them for the spiritual life ahead.

Unclean persons were not supposed to be in the synagogue, or church. Unclean persons were not allowed to be in proximity to the rabbi, unless they were asking to be cleansed, asking for the prayers that would cleanse them.

Modern medicine has proven that people who battle mental illness aren't unclean. Our brothers and sisters who struggle aren't in need of cleansing in order to be in the sanctuary, they are in need of compassion and acceptance. Jesus understood that. He modeled an approach to those who suffer from mental illness that is respectful and patient.

The list of those who are unclean has changed over the years: the mentally ill, those with leprosy, or skin diseases, those with HIV/AIDS, Ebola, Measles, addiction, convicts, intellectually challenged, undocumented immigrants, it shifts, depending on the society, depending on the times. But one thing stands out: there is always someone on the unclean list.

And while Jesus mostly abolished the idea that anyone needs cleansing in order to be in the church, aren't we *all* in need of some cleansing, at some level?

What used to be a horrible label put upon someone to keep them out of the temple, can now be a useful lens with which we can view our own spirits.

Where are we in need of healing? Where can we use some cleansing? We are all welcome in the church, no one will prevent us from coming in, from praying, from worshiping...no one is going to accuse any of us of being unclean. We are worthy, but we still may be in need of healing.

What used to be a public device misused for shaming can perhaps be a tool for self-evaluation: prayerful contemplation of our spiritual needs can help us be cleansed of the things that disturb us, the things that prevent us from being the faithful children that God intended us to be.

Using the concept of cleanliness when pointing at others makes it a weapon. Using the concept of cleanliness to explore our own spirits makes it a powerful and useful tool for growth.

Without shame, without guilt, without worry, we can evaluate where in our souls we are in need of healing. And when we find a spot, we can ask for that healing, confident that Jesus will act without judgment. The stigma that used to be placed on people who were considered unclean is gone now, all that is left is our desire to be the best person God created us to be.

The ancient and superstitious laws that governed what the faithful could eat, when they could eat, how they behaved, and who was allowed in the sanctuary, they're gone now. Jesus made sure that those who followed him knew that he'd come to abolish those laws.

But I believe there may be some value in contemplating the areas in our lives where we are in need of healing: not so that we might feel guilt or shame, but so that we might seek out being whole, the way God intended us to be.

Jesus teaches us with authority. He heals us with his patience. He forgives us, he encourages us, he invites us to be his partners in ministry.

Let's respond to his invitation, open to his cleansing, ready to make a new start, the journey begins each time we answer his call. Amen.