

A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2009

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Psalm 24 says, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall rise up in his holy place? Even he that hath clean hands and a pure heart." According to the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition, certain diseases, states of life and circumstances made one unclean and unable to come before God. Gentiles were seen as inherently unclean. Demons were referred to as unclean spirits.

Thus, the Gentile woman and her demonized daughter in today's gospel (Matthew 15:21f.) would have been seen as doubly unclean and unworthy to approach God. Yet, Jesus answered her prayer, which means that he accepted her.

While the New Testament religious leaders like the Pharisees focused on the external characteristics that made one unclean, Jesus focused on what made people unclean internally. When Jesus was accused of being unclean for not washing his hands in the manner prescribed by the tradition, he said,

"Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man." (Matthew 15:19-20 NKJV).

When we examine the motives and desires of the heart, we discover things that we don't see when we look only at the outward appearance. The religious leaders in the gospels looked righteous in their dress and religious observance. Jesus said that this outward appearance masked the pride, covetousness and malice that were in their hearts. When we examine the heart, we discover that no one is completely clean or holy.

The outward appearance of righteousness can hide sin, not only from others, but also from oneself. There is a human tendency to be satisfied with external appearances of success and goodness, to be content with the surface assessment of ourselves; to think that if we look good outwardly, we must be good, through and through.

When we feel righteous based on outward appearances, we develop a sense of entitlement. We come to think that we, the good, are distinguished from others who are less clean. For example, the New Testament Pharisee believed that his religious zeal put him in a better place with God. However, in terms of what was necessary to enter the kingdom, Jesus saw no difference between the Pharisee and the woman of Canaan. All have sin and all must repent and believe.

Because of our tendency to be satisfied with outward appearances, our sins can actually be a revelation and a means of grace. When our actions fall short of our aspirations, we come to see what is really in our hearts. We learn humility. We learn that we are sinners who need to be saved. We learn what it means to say, "There but for the grace of God go I." The woman of Canaan had humility and faith because her family had gotten into trouble and she knew she needed help. The religious leaders had neither because they saw themselves as righteous.

Our pre-communion prayer, which is derived in part from today's gospel, teaches us to approach the altar without a sense of entitlement. The words actually express greater humility than the woman of Canaan—we are not worthy even to gather the crumbs! The point is that, no matter how nice our clothes are, no matter what status we may have in the world, we enter the kingdom only by God's mercy, through faith.

The epistle (1 Thess. 4:1f.) also talks about what it means to be clean. St. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to sexual purity, saying, "God has not called us unto uncleanness but unto holiness." The state of being clean or holy that St. Paul refers to is the result of our encounter with God. We are clean because we have been made clean by him.

The epistle talks about fornication, sexual relations outside of marriage, which, in the first century world, often took place in the context of worship at pagan temples. In our culture, fornication is also a part of idol worship—the worship of pleasure—which says that sexual fulfillment is the highest goal of human existence. It is, of course, a lie; one that is proven false by the lives of those who have worshiped at the altar for the last sixty years.

It is the natural inclination of the human heart to worship at that altar. As Jesus said, "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications." God wants us to acknowledge what is really in our hearts. And he wants us to put our faith in Jesus and believe that he can make us whole. Chastity and self-control are not natural human virtues. They are the result of God's work in us. He makes us by grace what we are not by nature.

The woman of Canaan, with her demon possessed daughter, was involved in things that were not good. Demons don't just show up out of the blue and possess a person. It is likely that there was more than a little idolatry and its attendant sins at work in this family. Yet, she came to Jesus with humility, and Jesus accepted her on the basis of her faith.

There is a common misconception that we have to be good before we can be accepted by God. The New Testament teaches us the opposite. If we think we are good enough, we are not able to come to him at all. For there can be no forgiveness or redemption for those who admit no sin.

We come to Jesus again and again, as unclean, to be made clean. The Christian life is sort of a process of being washed that begins in baptism and ends in the Resurrection. It proceeds as we come to understand a certain paradox; the more we realize that we are not clean, the closer we are to being made clean by him.

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