

Bill Krieger
All Saints of the Desert
August 17, 2008; 14 Pentecost, Proper 15; Year A

Sermon: Matthew 15: 10-28 (Unclean)

Harvey Cox wrote a book titled, When Jesus Came to Harvard – Making Moral Choices Today.¹ It's based upon an undergraduate class he taught at Harvard in the 1980s and 90s, called *Jesus and the Moral Life*. When Professor Cox was first asked to teach a class on the moral example and teachings of Jesus, he had doubts about the idea. But in the end he decided to teach the class, and it was overwhelmingly popular.

Large numbers enrolled the first semester he offered the class, and after a few years 700-800 students were taking the class each year. Part of the reason for its popularity was that one course in moral reasoning was required for undergraduates. The faculty had created this program to deal with a growing embarrassment – that insider trading, sleazy legal practices, doctors more interested in money than patients, and scientists who fudged the data, filled the news. And worse, some were Harvard graduates.

In teaching the class, Cox found that his students, at first, were highly relativistic in their moral attitudes. They believed ethics were situational, and they were extremely unreceptive to imposing their moral thinking on others.

Yet they were also uncomfortable with accepting the full, relativist stance. Torturing children is wrong, period. So they sought something else, something apart from the dictates of fundamentalist belief, but something

¹ Harvey Cox, When Jesus Came to Harvard – Making Moral Choices Today, (Houghton Mifflin, Boston), 2004.

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better than post-modern relativism. And they felt, intuitively, that Jesus of Nazareth had something relevant to say to them.

Cox focused on two aspects of Jesus' life. First, that Jesus was a rabbi. And second, that as a rabbi he taught by stories. Stories he told, and stories he lived. Jesus didn't develop some abstract moral code, but instead he spoke in parables. And through this, Jesus pressed his audience to think, and to respond to the unexpected. And by engaging these stories, and those stories he lived, we find help in our search for the moral life.

Take our gospel today. At first glance, it seems like two very different stories. Neither all that relevant to us, as modern-day Christians. The first is about eating food without ritual hand washing. Chapter 15 of Matthew begins with the Pharisees and scribes asking Jesus, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." The Pharisees and scribes were being accurate in calling this a tradition of the elders, because it is not found as a part of the Hebrew Scriptures. The closest commandment is upon priests, not upon the people of Israel, as found in Leviticus 22. According to The Interpreter's Bible,² the Pharisees adopted this practice sometime in the 1st century A.D.

Jesus responds by giving them a concrete example of how they follow their own traditions, even to the point of contradicting the Law of God. This was the matter of placing a person's oath to donate property to the religious authorities over honoring one's parents.

² The Interpreter's Bible, Matthew, p.437.

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But Jesus was not content to leave things there. He went on to say that it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out. And while we tend to shrug and say, "Of course," we miss the force of this comment upon both the Pharisees and Jesus' disciples.

For by saying this, Jesus was renouncing something at the very heart of the Torah – the laws concerning clean and unclean foods. Something that no Jew would seriously question. The Law of Abraham clearly dictated which foods could and could not be eaten, and the Jewish people had observed these dietary laws for well over 1000 years.

Let me try and put this in perspective. It would be as if a guest priest came to All Saints and told us that we wouldn't be bothering with the ritual of the Eucharist today. That it's not what we eat or drink that matters; it's what's in our hearts. Even with our reputation for inclusion, you'd see me walk to the pulpit, announce that we would in fact be sharing the Eucharist today, and ask the guest priest to leave.

That's why Peter responded, "Explain this parable to us." And we hear Jesus say: "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander."

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In Matthew's gospel, Jesus goes on to say that these actions defile, not eating with unwashed hands. But Mark's version doesn't end with the reference to unwashed hands. Instead, Mark adds the parenthetical remark that by saying this Jesus declared all foods clean. Which remained a major source of contention for the early Church, as evidenced in the Book of Acts,³ and Paul's letters to the Romans⁴ and to the Galatians⁵.

So we return to the subject of Harvey Cox's book, making moral choices. And we encounter Jesus as saying that we shouldn't concern ourselves so much with our ritual purity, as with those actions we know to be immoral – murder, theft, adultery and the like. And, unlike Peter and the disciples and the Pharisees, we don't have a problem with this. We don't have a religious tradition telling us to abstain from certain foods. And most of us don't murder, or steal, or commit adultery.

Even if we take the Sermon on the Mount seriously – where Jesus says that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart – even then our consciences rest easy. Or when he says that being angry with a brother or sister in Christ, or insulting them, is tantamount to murder, we feel no reason to squirm. After all, false witness, slander, fornication – who really does any of this? Seems pretty irrelevant, ample reason for our lectionary to make this part of our gospel reading optional. [For those interested, private confession will be offered during office hours next week. Right after I find a deaf priest to hear mine.]

³ Acts 10, 11, 15

⁴ Romans 14, 15.

⁵ Galatians 2.

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Maybe it's best to move on to the next part of the Gospel. The story of the Canaanite woman. For us, there seems little that ties both parts of the gospel together. But for the early Church, the link would have been obvious. Unclean food, unclean people.

We tend to think of the Hindus as the prime example of a caste system, with the "untouchables" as unclean people. But this same sort of pecking order was operating in Jesus' day. There were the "true Israelites" – the priests, the Levites, and the full-blooded Jews. They were genetically clean and could intermarry.⁶

Then there was the next grouping. The so-called illegal children of priests, along with Gentile converts to Judaism. The illegal children of priests were not illegitimate, but were the offspring of children born to priests but by women who were not virgins. Widows, divorcees, and seduced women were in this category. Their children, along with Gentile converts, could marry Levites and full-blooded Jews, but not priests. So they were unclean for some, but clean for others.

Then came the illegitimate offspring, those abandoned, and eunuchs. Who could intermarry, or marry Gentile converts, but not members of true Israel (priests, Levites and full-blooded Jews) or the illegal children of priests.

And outside all of this were those who were thoroughly unclean. Simply put, an abomination. They were the Gentiles. An unclean people.

⁶ Bruce J. Malina, The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology, p.161-197.

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Which fits precisely with the story of the Canaanite woman. Why the disciples told her to go away. Why Jesus said to her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. And, as she knelt before him, begging for his help he said to her, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She was unclean, and an unclean woman, to boot.

Going back to Harvey Cox’s book, he says that Jesus not only taught in parables, but he also acted them out. In the tradition of the prophets, like Jeremiah wearing a yoke around his neck to speak of Judah’s conquest by Babylon. Or Isaiah, walking barefoot and naked in Jerusalem for three years, as a symbol of the fate of Egypt and Ethiopia at the hands of Assyria. Cox holds that Jesus, in this tradition, acted out parables as a sort of “street theater.” And, I hold that our gospel account of the Canaanite woman fits as an acted-out parable.

I see Jesus as immediately moved to help the Canaanite woman. But he holds his response in check, to teach his disciples. There are too many other stories, too many other actions taken, for me to see this otherwise. Jesus said of a Roman centurion, “I have not found faith like this in all of Israel.” His parable of the Good Samaritan, with its unexpected protagonist. Or the Samaritan woman at the well. Or the healing of the 10 lepers, with only the Samaritan returning to thank him. No, if one portrait of Jesus rings true, it is the rabbi who reached out to the unclean – the lepers, the tax collectors, the woman caught in adultery, the woman with the discharge of blood. For

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Jesus no person was unclean. Whether a Jew who was ritually defiled, or a Canaanite woman begging for her daughter to be healed.

So just as Nathan the prophet set up David with his story of the rich man stealing the poor man's pet lamb, here we have Jesus setting up his disciples. And anyone who would dare to call another person unclean. I cannot help but see Jesus smile when she says to him, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." And he praises her faith, and heals her daughter.

Our history is littered with people judged by others to be unclean. Blacks, fit only for slavery. Later equal, but separate. With segregated toilets and swimming pools and cemeteries. Where laws against interracial marriage persisted in the U.S. until 1967. It wasn't so long ago that the sight of a black man kissing a white woman caused revulsion and anger. And there were many other unclean people. The Jews, the Native Americans, the Chinese, the Mexicans, the Japanese.

It hasn't gone away. And ironically, we hardly see it in the story of the Canaanite woman. But it's there. The heart of our gospel message is that it is not the unclean that defiles. It is our condemnation of people as unclean that defiles us.

So what are we to do, in light of today's gospel? Ask ourselves who we think of as unclean. Ask ourselves who make us uncomfortable, who make us want to circle the wagons. Who tempt us to say, "Go away."