

# Disobedient Disciples

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**February 15, 2009 Sixth Sunday after Epiphany (Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

## Lectionary citations

2 Kings 5:1-14

Psalm 30

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Mark 1:40-45

One of the things human beings have is a strong sense of rightness and wrongness. I mean not in a moral sense, but in the sense of have a feeling of when things feel or look “right” and when they feel or look “wrong.” We really do not like it when things feel or look “funny.” Injury and illness make us look and feel “wrong.” We just wish we could get back to our old normal self. I think this was hard wired into the human brain as a way of detecting potentially dangerous or harmful situations. Our ancestors avoided many cases of food poisoning by not eating meat that looked or smelled “funny.” Of course, like anything else, this trait is not always beneficial. Many of the folks I see in my mental health assessments get into trouble because they stop taking medications that make them feel “funny.” I think it is this automatic response to things and people who seem “wrong” that leads us to be uncomfortable around the disabled, regardless of our conscious feelings of acceptance.

I think the ancient Hebrews took a natural feeling and ran with it, developing a complex and confusing system of “clean” and “unclean” things. “Clean” things were things that looked and felt “right.” They were symmetrical, uniform, all of one color. “Unclean” things were just the opposite. People, animals, and nonliving things could be clean or unclean. Clean things were suitable for God's people. God's people needed to stay as far away as they could from unclean things. It was especially important to keep unclean things away from the place where the people worshiped God and away from anyone and anything that was used in worship.

Certain kinds of things, for example pigs, were always unclean. Clean things became unclean by contact. The uncleanness could be visible, like a rash, dirt, or blood or it could be invisible. Clean things that had become unclean usually had to be put into isolation. In many cases, the uncleanness would disappear after a certain period. If visible uncleanness did not disappear, the rash got worse or the mildew on the wall kept spreading, then the isolation would have to continue. People who stay unclean would have to stay isolated from the community as long as the condition endured. Nonliving items that stayed unclean would generally have to be destroyed. This could be costly, for example, when a whole house would have to be torn down due to persistent mildew on the walls.

Injury and disability did not make someone unclean. Most diseases did not make someone unclean. This even applied to skin diseases. For example, if a skin disease caused white patches on the skin, the person would be unclean. However, if the entire person's skin turned white, the person would no longer be unclean. Diseases and medical problems that made a person unclean could be a punishment for sin. However, the cause was often unknown. It was a misfortune, but there was no cure or treatment for it. The person just had to wait in isolation and hope and pray that it would go away.

If a person's skin disease went away, they had to show themselves to the priest for inspection. If the priest verified the disease was healed, the unclean person had to make a sacrifice to God that would make them ceremonially clean. This sacrifice was elaborate and expensive. For a well-off person, it required two male lambs and one ewe lamb, flour and oil. A poor person had to come up with a male lamb and two birds, as well as flour and oil. The sacrifices, not the healing of the disease, made the person clean. This was a sacrifice of atonement, which indicates that it was some offense against God that caused the uncleanness. However, there was no attempt to determine the particular sin involved. The nice thing about this ceremony is that after it was complete, it was as if the person had never been unclean. They were fully restored to the community and religious life.

I apologize for going through all this historical material, but it may help you understand Jesus' ministry. It may be hard to believe, but for the people of Jesus' time, his healing of the sick and disabled did not have any major religious implications. Healing was not something that religious people did. It was not expected of a priest and it was not expected of a king—the Messiah of the House of David. Exorcism, the casting out of demons, was also not something religious people were expected to do. In fact, Jesus' command over evil spirits raised suspicions that Jesus was in fact working for the chief evil spirit, Satan. Jesus' healing activities were unusual and notable and led people to compare him to prophets of long ago, such as Elijah. However, they were not a direct threat to the religious system of his day.

In today's Old Testament lesson, a Hebrew prophet cures a Syrian general, a gentile, of a skin disease. As a gentile, Naaman could not be spiritually unclean. He had an unpleasant disease and he wanted someone to cure it. On the recommendation of a Hebrew slave girl, he ends up on Elisha's doorstep. The prophet does not even come out to see Naaman, he just sends a servant to tell the general to go bathe seven times in the river Jordan. After some resistance—the rivers of Syria are a lot bigger and clearer than the Jordan—Naaman does as he is told and is cured. Elisha gives God the glory and will not accept any reward from Naaman. For Naaman, this is not just a healing, but it is also a conversion. He even takes back a load of good Israelite dirt, so he can henceforth make prayers and sacrifices to the one true God.

According to Luke, Jesus referred to this scripture in his first sermon in Nazareth, the sermon that led the town folks to try to throw him off a cliff! This scripture may have been special to Jesus because it highlights the role of God's prophets as healers and it shows how the healing power of God could be extended to a foreigner, even an enemy of Israel and through that healing a foreigner could be brought to faith in God. Jesus came to preach, but with authority, and his healing was a demonstration of that authority. Jesus was showing that he shared the power of the prophets of old, unlike the scribes and teachers of the Law.

Mark makes it clear that Jesus began his ministry by preaching, healing, and casting out demons. However, he did not plan to confront directly the religious authorities of his day by attacking the cleanness system. Today's Gospel shows Jesus going against his plans by touching and healing an unclean man suffering from a skin disease. Our NIV states that Jesus was "filled with compassion" for the man. The TNIV says, "Jesus was indignant." Other versions say Jesus was "filled with anger." Some disagree, but I say that Jesus was angry with the man. Yet, despite his anger, he reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.

This was not something that Jesus intended to do. By touching the leper, Jesus has become unclean. Yet Jesus has no intention of going through the appropriate ritual of washing his clothes and staying in isolation until sunset. Jesus also knew that the excitement that this action would generate would distract from his preaching ministry. Therefore, Jesus goes into damage control mode. "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." The man disobeys Jesus direct order: "Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news." You wonder if Jesus really expected the man to come up with the lamb, birds, flour, and oil! As Jesus expected, this incident disrupts his plan to preach in the villages of the Galilee. The crowds are so large that his preaching cannot be heard. "As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere."

This story points out that Jesus came to show mercy and that he was merciful even when he was angry and frustrated with those he healed. Jesus has a plan of ministry, but he has a purpose that is more important than any plan. The story also shows that many people disobeyed Jesus, despite the good he did for them and his obvious authority. We are reminded of the Apostles sleeping in the Garden, even though he told them, "Stay here and keep watch." Some argue that God works through the disobedience, but I believe that God mostly works around it. Jesus is never stopped by our disobedience. Jesus is committed, but he is also flexible. If he cannot preach in the towns, he preaches in the lonely places. If he cannot go to the people, they can come to him. Jesus starts out seeming harmless, preaching about the Kingdom of God, healing, and casting out demons.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tries to keep a low profile, keeping his nature as Messiah a secret as long as possible. However, the radical implications of his ministry cannot be hidden for long. Where Jesus really broke with the faith of his fathers was in his attitude towards uncleanness. It was his attitude towards uncleanness, as well as towards the Sabbath, that radically separated Jesus from both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Jesus seems to have seen cleanliness as a kind of cheap, phony holiness, something superficial and unreal. Jesus pointed out that the cleanness that his fellow Israelites prized was a surface cleanness that concealed a spiritual rot below the surface. Cleanliness was like a coat of whitewash on a structurally unsound wall. For Jesus, people with skin diseases and women with bleeding problems were innocent victims of a religious system founded on a fundamental hypocrisy. For Jesus, looking Holy was not the same as being Holy and acting Holy. Jesus knows the Law and the prophets, and he has come to

fulfill them. However, in fulfilling the Old Testament, Jesus redefines it. Spiritual cleanness and uncleanness will take on new meanings that have nothing to do with skin disease, ritual washings, and sacrificing lambs and birds. He is the Christ of the Living God and he will turn the world upside down!

Jesus brought the Israelites the difficult message that they had been disobedient disciples of God. They had let their worries about the clean and unclean become a barrier to loving God with all their soul, heart, mind, and strength; and loving their neighbor as themselves. It is always good for us to ask ourselves whether we too are sometimes disobedient disciples who live by the letter of the law while killing its spirit. Are there aspects of the way we talk, worship, and act that exclude people who look, act, and smell "funny." We look down at the Israelites for their complicated dietary laws and their unwillingness to break bread with Gentiles. Although we do not have a formal system for classifying people as clean and unclean, we may be excluding people without even knowing it. The Israelites cherished their system of cleanliness as part of their special identity as God's people. Yet this system turned out to be harmful and unnecessary. Getting rid of these practices, along with animal sacrifice, helped Judaism to survive as a living faith to this day. Do we have any traditions that exclude and harm? I do not have the answer, but I know that it is good to ask.

It was Jesus' radical revision of the system of spiritual cleanness and uncleanness that led the Pharisees and Sadducees to reject him as a teacher, much less as Messiah. In that way, it may have been a major part of why he was arrested and crucified. If he had only healed the sick and chased away demons, he might not have gone to the cross. It is also Jesus' rejection of the cleanness system that prepared the way for all the nations of the earth, including those of us who enjoy a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich, to follow him. If we are obedient disciples, we are free to follow him all the way to the cross. Amen.

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