

We are all Unclean Sermon

(Matthew 15:1-20)

Trinity City all services

1. Encounter with the unclean

- It was a lovely summer day, and we had our extended family at our home for a Christmas dinner.
 - Everyone had prepared food for the day, and it came, one by one, as our guests arrived.
 - There was the ham that had been slowly roasting for a day.
 - The variety of delicious salads.
 - Some spicy chicken wings - it was an Asian family after all.
- And then the centrepiece of our dinner came along - the turkey arrived.
 - Someone started to take off the foil that had been protecting it during transit.
 - And then there was a shriek!
 - There in the gravy, were little specks, which could've been mistaken for turkey bits, but these specks started to wriggle.
 - There were maggots that were swimming in our Christmas dinner.
- Now, at that point, what would you have done?
 - Remove the maggots, zap the turkey in the microwave, and dig in?
 - Or, deep fry the maggots and serve it as a delicacy?
 - Or, would you have thrown out the entire turkey because it has become unclean?
- The counter-cultural Christ says something quite outrageous - he says that we are all *unclean*.
 - It's as if he looks at us and responds as if he just saw maggots in the gravy.
- I look at us here, and I don't think you can get a cleaner group of people in one spot.
 - We had our shower, we brushed our teeth, we put on clean clothes, the food we ate was clean.
 - Look, there's even anti-bacterial hand wash.
 - And yet, listening to Jesus' words, we are all unclean, dirty, smelly, filthy.
 - That's the reality from God's point of view.
- Being clean before God matters a lot because it decides if we are acceptable before him.
 - If we want to approach him, we need to be clean.
 - There's the great tension isn't it - 'God so loves the world ...', but the world cannot just approach the pristinely clean God when we are so *unclean*.
 - How can the unclean approach the clean God?

2. Encounter with the holy God

- Well, God's people are no strangers to this tension.
- They learned very quickly, during their beginnings, about approaching the holy God with care.
- On one occasion, they were at the foot of Mount Sinai, poised to hear God's good and loving commands.
 - A multitudinous group of people - and they had just been rescued from the clutches of Egypt.
 - God had given them a taste of just how powerful he is - for, through incredible displays of his power, he reduced the mighty Egypt to nothing.
 - It had put fear into the hearts of the Egyptians, and the surrounding nations, and also the Israelites.
 - But his people - they had his protection and guidance.
 - They needed to know how they were to relate to this awesome, powerful and pure God.
- So, at Mount Sinai, this is what God says to them (it's printed in your outline):

"And the Lord said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes ¹¹ and be ready by the third day, because on that day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death.'" (Exodus 19:10-12)

- They couldn't just walk up to God, and say 'G'Day, you want to join us for a cup of coffee?'
 - They needed to *consecrate* themselves - to make themselves holy, separate from others, and pure.
 - So, they needed to wash their clothes and, in later verses, it says that they needed to abstain from sexual relations, and also obey God's other commands.
- Did you get the sense of how serious God was taking it?
 - You touch the mountain, and you will die.
 - That's fairly serious isn't it?
- It didn't take a lot of convincing for the Israelites to obey at that point - they were just trembling in fear at how God was revealing himself.
 - There was thunder, and lightning, a thick cloud over the mountain, smoke billowing, the mountain itself trembled violently, and the Lord descending the mountain in fire!
 - Wouldn't that make you quake in your boots?
 - It was all to illustrate the point that God is fearsome and he is to be approached carefully.
- If his people wanted to approach him, then they needed to prepare themselves and be like him.
- God wanted his people to be distinct from the world around them, just like he is distinct and pure compared to the world (Leviticus 20:25-26).
- For the Israelites, being clean involved washing clothes, and not eating unclean animals, staying away from corpses, washing themselves after bodily discharge, and offering sacrifices.
- And it's not just the physical things that mattered, it was also about how they related to God and to other people.
 - They were to worship God alone and no other.
 - Worshipping other gods or idols will end in death.
 - They were also to love and care for the people around them.
 - Killing people also will incur death.
 - If the unclean wanted to approach the clean God, they needed to clean themselves physically, and clean up their relating to God and other people.
- Being clean matters because God is clean.
- Illustration: do you ever notice when someone doesn't wash their hands after using the washroom?
 - What would you do if you met one of them across the counter at your favourite cafe?
 - Would you pull out your hand sanitiser and say 'please use this first?'
 - Maybe make a complaint to management?
 - Or, just find a different cafe?
 - When we meet others, we expect a level of hygiene and courtesy don't we?

- Well, when God meets us, he rightly expects his level of relating.
- If the unclean wants to approach the clean God, we need to get clean.

3. Uncleaness from within

- Isn't it astounding that when it comes to approaching Jesus that people around him are unscathed?
 - There may be no thunder and lightning, and shaking fiery mountain, but he is indeed God the Son - equally holy, equally pure, and equally clean.
 - And even more so, God's supposed people try to correct him about his cleanliness!
 - Along the way, Jesus uncovers *their* true nature - that they may have cleaned the exterior, but their uncleanness comes from within.
- In our Bible reading today, we've got to appreciate the ironies that are operating.
 - The Jewish religious leaders take offence at Jesus' disciples' lack of hand washing.
 - Well, it wasn't actually a requirement by God in the first place, but a rule that the elders had imposed.
 - It might've started off being a sincere desire to be clean before God, but it ended up in hypocrisy.
 - Jesus points out that, in the area of their honouring parents, they in fact break God's command in favour of their elder's rules.
 - And they have the gall to accuse Jesus' disciples of being unclean.
 - They may have washed their hands before eating, but Jesus uncovers their true nature: "These people honour [God] with their lips but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:8; Isaiah 29:13)
 - At the centre of God's requirements for being clean is his desire for people to love him with all their heart, and soul and strength.
 - Especially when he has done so much to bless us.
 - God doesn't have a fetish for good hygiene - as if he's the divine health inspector that loves to ping us when we don't wash our hands.
 - He's the loving God who has provided very much for us, and he wants us to love and honour him, but it needs to be his way.
 - What Jesus found were people who had no intention of loving God but only to look like they did.
 - The religious leaders might've done more than their share of cleaning themselves physically, but they had neglected their relationship with God.
- Jesus crystallises what it is that makes us unclean: "What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean'" (Matthew 15:11)
 - Here's what comes out of the mouth or heart: "evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander".
 - So, not only do the Jewish leaders neglect their honouring of God, they disregarded his command to love other people, and instead they hurt others.
 - In reality, it's not dirty hands that makes people unacceptable before God, but their disregard of God and other people.
 - The physical washing was supposed to help them remember the inner washing of the heart.
- Illustration: I was on holidays with my wife in Malaysia recently.
 - One of the delightful things about the city of George Town, Penang, is the food.
 - Ridiculously good noodles, and desserts, and snacks.
 - But it was a mixed experience.
 - We'd be sitting on a table by the roadside, eating the best Wan Tan noodles in the world.
 - But along with the delectable aromas coming from the wok, would be pockets of foreign odours coming from the drain!
 - I don't think I had felt that unclean for a long time!
 - But when God sees me, it's not the odours from the drain that he smells, or the waft coming from the nearby rubbish heap, or the pungent body odour that I develop in tropical weather.
 - That's not what he smells.

- He smells the stench of my sin, and your sin.
- We are all unclean, because it is the nature of all people on earth (take a look at your outline):

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23)

- Sin is talking about our actions in rebellion or disregard of God, and it includes our actions against our fellow man.
- And there is a consequence for our unclean sinfulness before God, and it is worse than death.
- There is eternal condemnation that we face, forever experiencing the anger of God.
- The counter-cultural Christ has condemned more than just the religious leaders in his day, he has left the whole of mankind facing judgment.
- And mankind is left in shame and dishonour and sin.
- Now, can we appreciate that we've all got a problem?
 - I mean, the outside we have a chance to clean, but the inside ... that's way harder.
 - Remember that God requires that we relate to him perfectly, and we relate to each other perfectly.
 - With no hint of sin against him or people.
 - No one can claim we've done that.
- If we the unclean want to approach the clean God, our sin needs to be cleaned up.

4. Cleansing by Jesus

- It is at this point that Jesus does something else that's counter-cultural.
 - He deals with our uncleanness himself (again in your outline):

“But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:11)

- After enumerating the things that make us unclean and sinful, this tells us what Jesus has done to graciously clean us.
 - We are washed - not physically, but having our sins dealt with.
 - We are sanctified - another way of saying we are made holy, and distinctly like God.
 - We are justified - that is, we are made right with God.
- It is astounding what Jesus does to achieve this.
 - Jesus is perfectly clean - he's always honoured God with both his lips and his heart, and he's done nothing but love and serve mankind.
 - The perfectly clean Jesus takes on the judgment that we deserve for our uncleanness and sin.
 - Jesus, who is God become man, who could have made the mountain shake and speak with a thunderous voice, he dies on our behalf instead of us.
- Now, if we humble ourselves before Jesus and put our trust in him, God will see Jesus' cleanness instead of our dirty and filthy sin.
 - Imagine that - being able to approach God with freedom and confidence because he won't see our sin, but Jesus' righteousness.
 - The unclean can only approach the clean God by trusting in Jesus.
- Illustration: I have a wonderful relationship with my mother-in-law.
 - She thinks I'm the best son a mother could have.
 - That's because she only speaks Chinese, and I only speak English.
 - So, here's how it works.
 - I say something in English, Jennie translates it into Chinese, and my mother-in-law thinks I'm amazing.
 - Because, of course, during the translation process, Jennie makes what I say absolutely beautiful.
 - I could say anything I like - I could say the most insensitive and culturally offensive things (not intentionally mind you), and it turns out really good.
 - Don't you wish you had a Jennie too?

- Well, when we believe in Jesus, God hears beautiful things from us, because it is Jesus and the Holy Spirit speaking to him on our behalf.
- Jesus takes our imperfect worship and makes it acceptable before God.
- The unclean are acceptable before the clean God through Jesus.
- There's even more that God graciously does.
 - He even works through his Spirit to change us on the inside (2 Thessalonians 2:13)
 - As we trust in Jesus, God changes our thoughts, and desires, and motivations, and passions, and love.
 - More and more, what we want becomes what God wants.
 - More and more we want to love him and love others.
 - And the cleanness that we are declared to have through Jesus, we live out more and more.
 - That's why it's a little strange to see imperfect Christians being acceptable before God.
 - Christians haven't become perfect all of a sudden - that's fairly obvious isn't it.
 - Instead we depend fully on Jesus to deal with our sin and to make us clean before God.
- The counter-cultural Christ says that we are all unclean.
 - But he also makes it possible for us to be clean before God through Jesus.

The world today

- I don't think what Jesus says is entirely foreign to our ears today.
 - We don't need to be Christian to notice that there are people who are clean on the outside but quite unclean on the inside.
 - At points we are disappointed in *ourselves* when the hatred, and anger, and jealousy, and self-centredness comes out.
 - We certainly feel anger when others treat us in those ways.
 - And we've tried many things to clean ourselves, and I have met some very impressive people who selflessly act and give, and they're not believers of Jesus.
 - I know of an international who volunteers to spend time with elderly people who feel abandoned by their own family.
 - I know of someone who fights tenaciously for the rights of the weaker in a tennis club.
 - A music store owner who takes the time to talk to the struggling in our city.
 - We have tried to clean ourselves with wonderful selfless deeds and yet our less honourable thoughts and deeds keep showing up.
 - Australia has tried writing laws to prevent the uncleanness coming out.
 - And yet, even if we remove all the lewd movies and advertisements, there would still be sexual immorality and adultery.
 - Even if we banned all guns, and all violent video games, and paint-ball, there'd still be murder and evil thoughts.
 - Beef up the police force, and impose greater penalties in courts, and there'd still be theft, and false testimony, and slander.
 - We have tried so many things, and yet the inner uncleanness keeps on breaking through.
 - Our world doesn't have the solution.
- God has the solution.
 - In previous weeks, we have heard the counter-cultural Christ revealing his lordship over the heavens and the earth.
 - We have heard the reality of heaven and hell.
 - That's the solution: heaven where there is nothing but never-ending love from the eternal King Jesus.
 - Where all sin is excluded.
 - And God has even provided the means to be included in his heaven.
 - In fact, there's nothing greater God could've done than to give up his one and only son.
 - So that we the unclean, can be accepted by the clean God, through Jesus.
- May I encourage us to trust in Jesus to make us clean before God.

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

