

What Comes Out

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Columbus, OH
September 15, 2024



In my deepest wound, I saw your glory, and it dazzled me. —Augustine

Ancient Witness: Mark 7:5, 14-15

So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with unclean hands?”

Then Jesus said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!”

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters us from the outside makes us impure; it is what comes out of us that makes us impure.”

A philosopher, having made an appointment to dispute with the great spiritual teacher, Nasrudin, called at the appointed hour and found him away from home. Nasrudin had forgotten their plan and was in the teahouse playing table games and telling stories with his friends.

After waiting for some time the philosopher grew angry. Picking up a piece of chalk, he wrote “Stupid Oaf” on Nasrudin’s door and left in a huff.

As soon as he got home and saw this, Nasrudin rushed to the philosopher’s house. “I had completely forgotten our appointment,” he said, “I apologize for not having been home. Of course, I remembered the appointment as soon as I saw that you had left your name on my door!”

You know, it is so true, that the way we treat others will ultimately tell about *who we are*. And so it is a good question to ask: What names do we leave on doors? *What comes out of us*, even at times of frustration, tells about who we are.

Jesus said, “It’s not what goes *into* a person from the outside that can defile; rather it’s what comes *out* of the person that defiles.”

This is the Jesus that I love so much—the spiritual teacher who spoke in parables and aphorisms, which, like Zen koans, beckoned the listener to an inner journey and deep reflection.

What are we to make of this aphorism, this pithy statement, of Jesus? Well, first it’s important to understand some things about the world in which Jesus lived.

Judean society was structured and divided into *different zones*, and contamination or defilement happened when persons from one zone intruded into another zone not intended for them. For example, women were not permitted into the zone set aside for males, and gentiles were not allowed into any of the space restricted to Judeans or converts.

The zones corresponded to the *degrees of purity* for each of the categories. The sanctity of persons is defined in descending order as follows: The high priest, Ordinary priests, Levites, Israelites of pure blood, “illegal” children of priests, Gentile converts, bastards and eunuchs, and finally, those born with deformed sexual features, and Gentiles (non-Jews).

It was Mary Douglas who defined dirt or impurity this way: Dirt, she said, is “matter that is out of place.” And so, for example, mustard when it’s on your hot dog is mustard. But when mustard is on your shirt, it’s dirt. It’s out of place.

And the walls around temples in the ancient Near East defined sacred space and set it off from profane space; it was the boundary between the pure and the polluted or defiled. These are all laid out in our sacred texts. But how do we deal with these texts?

I have a friend back in Minneapolis, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, who tells a story of when he was in Seminary in New York.

One day he was in class and was writing some things in his Bible. Now he had a very pious classmate, who was appalled that he would be marking up the Holy Scriptures, and he said to Jack, “*What are you doing?*”

And my friend, who has a playful, mischievous streak, said, “Oh this, I’m just crossing out the parts that I don’t like!”

And you know, we all do this, really. There are parts of the Bible we filter out and parts we take more seriously, consciously or unconsciously. Jesus did this, and I believe this is something we should do honestly, as well. Further, the life of Jesus can offer us clues about *how* to do this.

Now, Jesus routinely broke the walls and barriers that divided sacred space from profane, and he ignored social dividers that enforced segregation. Jesus consorted with gentiles, which means that *he*, himself, suffered in a general way from ritual uncleanness. Continual contact with the impure would have spiritually stigmatized Jesus.

By the way, every society has zoning codes, even today. Industrial areas are not to be mixed with residential areas. It is forbidden to locate a liquor store within so many feet of a school or church. There once were legal codes called, “red lining,” that segregated the sale of houses by race in neighborhoods until recently in this country. Many other zoning practices are unwritten.

Now, not only were there these zones, but there were also *purity codes* that marked off boundaries between the people of God and everyone else. One became contaminated or defiled by touching someone unclean, such as a leper, or a woman who was menstruating, or a corpse. One could also become defiled by eating something deemed unsuitable because it was inherently unclean or improperly prepared. By the way, because they feared contamination, Judeans refused to share a common table with those who did not follow these purity regulations that were enforced by the priests.

Jesus’ table, however, around which we gather today, makes no such distinctions. Jesus welcomes all people regardless of who they are or what they believe in order that they may discover God’s loving, accepting presence within them.

And, of course, let us not think for a minute that we have done away with purity codes. The church has many ways of separating the unacceptable from the acceptable such as, even today, some churches still prohibit a gay or lesbian person from being a pastor or leader of a church is a modern day formalized and codified purity regulation. It asserts that gay and lesbian people are less acceptable than others and that they must deny an essential part of who they are in order to be acceptable, to be ordained.

And friends, I can’t begin to tell you how many talented, faithful, beautiful people many churches have lost to this contemporary purity code.

Jesus, who saw himself as a faithful Jew, challenged and broke these restrictions. (It is faithful to challenge and reform one’s tradition.) Robert Funk put it this way:

It is clear from the gospel records that Jesus was a Galilean deviant and was socially promiscuous. His deviation and promiscuity were a part of the kingdom of God, which he claimed his Father had authorized him to announce As a consequence, he ignored, or transgressed, or violated purity regulations and taboos.

When Jesus says, “What goes into you can’t defile you; what comes out of you can,” he reverses the direction. It’s not unclean food that defiles, but what comes out. He is typically ambiguous and

probably indulging in a bit of humor, since “what comes out” after one eats is unclean and defiling as everyone knows. But there are other things that come out of human beings that pollute the world – hatred, bigotry, and the like. He issues a categorical challenge to the purity laws. He is undermining a whole way of life, challenging what is established and erasing social boundaries taken to be sacrosanct. He is saying that what is important is that there is something within us that needs to come out. What comes out is what matters. In his view, *every* person has immediate access to God’s presence, God’s love, and God’s forgiveness that is waiting to be realized, that is waiting to come out. The world is not neatly divided into the sacred and the profane. Life is a marvelous mixture. All people, all things, all places are infused with the sacred. And it’s *waiting to come out*.

Once a Dervish holy man and his student were walking down a long, quiet road. Suddenly there was dust rising in the distance. A fine carriage pulled by six horses approached at a full gallop. The men soon realized that this carriage was not going to slow down or veer to avoid them. In fact, it was coming upon them at such speed that they had to throw themselves from the road, landing quite unceremoniously in a ditch. The two men got up as quickly as they could and looked at the carriage as it sped by.

The student thought to curse, but not before the teacher ran after them calling: “May all of your deepest desires be satisfied!”

“Why would you wish something so good for those men?” the student asked. “They just forced us into the ditch, we could have been hurt.”

“Do you really think,” replied the teacher, “that if their deepest desires were satisfied, they would go around treating others as they treated us?”

We are a marvelous mixture of the sacred and the profane. The question is, what will come out? Will we be motivated by our pain or fear or self-hatred? Or will we see goodness within ourselves and within others? Each person has the ability to let the holiness within them emerge. This is the choice we all face daily.

In the song, “Anthem” by Leonard Cohen there are some great lines:

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.*

Everything is cracked, yet filled with light. We are a marvelous mixture. And I would add that the cracks are how the light gets *out*, too. It’s like that wonderful image on today’s bulletin cover of a statue by Paige Bradley. The apostle Paul put it this way: we are all “earthen vessels” yet filled with a “treasure.” We are a mixture. And it is through our cracks, our humanity, our vulnerability that this treasure, this light, this Sacred Presence can come out, not through our pride or self-sufficiency or goodness. As Augustine said, “In my deepest wound, I saw your glory, and it dazzled me.”

Some say that the primary spiritual task is to let God—the Light—Love—into your heart. I disagree. The Sacred Presence—God—is already there. The primary spiritual task is *to let it out*—to look deeply within, see it and release it!

There's a story of an old Cherokee teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside of me," he said to the boy.

"It's a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego." He continued, "The other is good—he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. The same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

So we are this mixture, and what comes out of us will be determined by which wolf we feed, upon which one we focus.

One more story: One Sufi mystic has written about Jesus. He said that sometimes people would make fun of Jesus or curse him aloud, but then he would always answer back with prayers in their names. On one such occasion his disciples asked him how he would not be angry and want to curse those people. They asked him how he could pray for those who had harmed him.

Jesus answered them by saying that he "could only spend of what he had in his purse." In other words, Jesus had only love "in his purse," so that was all he had to give to those who assaulted him.

And this is our challenge: to look inside ourselves and see God's presence—this Oneness, this oceanic Love, this Goodness, this unshakable Joy—hidden deeply in each of us and waiting to come out. Jesus calls us to notice this sacred presence within ourselves and all things, and to become so preoccupied and enamored with it, that it becomes the only thing we have in our purse. And so may this sacred within us be *what comes out!*

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)