

When Jon sent me the lectionary texts this week I texted him back and told him: “I don’t want to preach on any of these texts. But I do have a sermon I’ve been wanting to preach for several years now. Do I have permission to go rogue?”

Jon said, “go for it.”

During the pandemic I read a book by Richard Beck titled “*Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Mortality*” that wove together the themes of mercy and sacrifice with the psychology of disgust. We all get grossed out by things, I had never thought about how that curious impulse, which seems peculiar and unique to every individual, could play into our spiritual lives.

From what we can tell, humans are the only species that experience disgust.

Paul Rozin identifies three categories.

The one that may immediately come to mind is core disgust, the disgust around food or anything entering or leaving the body.

At the risk of triggering your disgust reflexes, let's take the example of saliva. We all swallow it all day. But if you were to spit into a dixie cup and then drink it, we would consider that disgusting.

“Disgust regulates the experience, marking the difference. We don’t mind swallowing what is on the “inside” but we are disgusted by swallowing something that is “outside,” even if that something was on the “inside” only a second ago.

The reaction is not logical, it is psychological.

Disgust is not a reaction we are born with. Babies will put anything in their mouths. But we develop it pretty quickly, and it serves an important biological function.

Core disgust is an innate adaptive response that rejects and expels offensive or toxic food from either being eaten or swallowed.

It also keeps us from that which exits the body which may contaminate and cause disease.

Disgust is also tied in with moral and social judgements. These are often culturally defined. Every group of people has a category of moral, social or religious stimuli that trigger disgust. We are expected to avoid these for our own good and for the good of the community.

There are many examples of this in the the levitical laws of the Old Testament, many of which seem bizarre (and now even offensive to our modern sensibilities).

It was a time in history when infection and disease was often fatal. What you did had a direct effect on your community. and identity was so bound to what you did and did not do that you could cease to exist as a people without certain distinctives.

There was a survival element to disgust.

A third category of disgust has to do with anything that reminds us of our mortality. Death, disease, dead bodies etc.

This also is a useful reflex as we are biologically driven to survive, seeking life over death.

Hopefully you can see the usefulness of disgust and why it is a part of who we are.

Disgust is also incredibly powerful in how it informs our understanding of contamination, even when it doesn't make logical sense.

We believe contamination is caused by physical touch or proximity. Consider our history of racism that insisted on separate water fountains and seating areas in restaurants and on buses.

We believe even tiny amounts of something cause harm.

As the saying goes,

A drop of urine in a bottle of wine will ruin the bottle of wine but a drop of wine in a bottle of urine will do nothing to make the urine drinkable.

We have a sense that what has been contaminated is permanent and nothing can be done to rehabilitate it.

When I was in college one of our classes went to a wastewater treatment facility. It was an unsettling experience, going from the ponds of what looked and smelled like sewage, all the way to the end of the cleaning and filtering process. Science proves the water by the end is drinkable. But if you had offered me a glass right then and there, after having my disgust impulse triggered for several hours...I can't say as to whether I would have accepted it or not.

This is all very interesting Caley, but what does it have to do with our spiritual lives? What does it have to do with Jesus' statement: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Beck writes:

"Sacrifice - the purity impulse - marks off a zone of holiness, admitting the "clean" and expelling the "unclean." Mercy, by contrast, crosses those purity boundaries. Mercy blurs the distinction, bringing clean and unclean into contact. Thus the tension. One impulse - holiness and purity - erects boundaries, while the other impulse - mercy and hospitality - crosses and ignores those boundaries...it is hard to both erect a boundary and dismantle that boundary at the same time...the antagonism between mercy and sacrifice is psychological in nature."

Think about how many of our disagreements within the church have to do with arguments over holiness vs hospitality. It ties into the category of moral or social disgust.

We all have it, but studies show that we are triggered by different things.

Liberal leaning people tend to cry “that’s wrong!” when someone is being harmed/not cared for or when something is unfair/unjust

Conservative leaning people are offended by those same things, but they also tend to weigh in several other moral factors, such as loyalty, authority/respect (especially in regards to church tradition and teaching) and purity/sanctity.

Mercy tends to align with fairness, sacrifice tends to align with purity.

Unless the conservative agrees to restrict their normative judgements to the foundations of harm and fairness, they will not be able to appreciate the view of the liberal. Conversely, until the liberal agrees to admit warrants from the moral foundations of loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity, they will not be able to appreciate the outrage of the conservative.

We think we are having conversations on a logical level, but if our theological impulses are influenced by disgust, then maybe not all is as logical as it seems.

People in the church will tend to drift toward theological positions that psychologically resonate, that “feel” intuitively speaking, true and right,

There is a term for this: *Moral dumbfounding* - knowing something is wrong without being able to articulate why.

Very often, arguments and the warrants found within them are secondary to the felt experience.

And it is extraordinarily difficult to respond to people tenderly, empathetically, and mercifully - when you are full of moral outrage over their behavior.

As maddening as the coexistence may be, liberals and conservatives need each other.

In our discernment there needs to be voices in the room that say we must be ever-widening our circle of inclusion. God is doing a new thing.

And there also needs to be voices raising the question: In embracing everyone without any exceptions or criteria, will distinctiveness and integrity be lost?

Will the church lose its character?

Is a community that embraces everything failing to be any community at all?

Jesus values both mercy and holiness. Therefore it is a tension we can hold as well.

However, Jesus rejects the expulsive mechanism of disgust as a form of holiness

When understandings of purity, sin, salvation, and holiness are regulated or influenced by disgust psychology we unwittingly import a contamination-based reasoning into the life of the church.

Disgust psychology prompts us to think about evil as if it were a virus or a polluting object. When we do this the logic of contamination is imported into moral discourse and judgment.

Contagion renders hospitality impossible.

You simply cannot have exclusion and embrace at the same time.

I mentioned earlier that disgust is negativity dominant. One drop of the negative ruins the positive.

Jesus on the other hand, is positivity dominant. Contact with Jesus purifies. The real problem in Matthew 9 is that the Pharisees saw human beings as carriers of contamination and pollution. We do this too. It is a short leap to being disgusted by something to being disgusted by the person doing the thing or holding the view.

Jesus enters ritual defilement before ritual purity.

Rather than focusing on unclean people, Jesus focused on the boundary between clean and unclean.

And a missional church embraces this reversal, following Jesus into the world without fears of contamination.

To follow God into the scandal of the Incarnation, into the living, breathing, fleshy body God inhabited and that we exist in every day, the church will have to squarely confront its experience of disgust.

“A church handicapped by its fears and lack of self-awareness, is ill-prepared to move into missional living and a passionate engagement with the world in all its squalor.”

Liberal or conservative, we have to dig deeper.

Christian love cannot be from our excess. *Love is not letting go of the leftovers, the margin left behind after we have taken care of our material needs and secured our creature comforts.*

First Mennonite, to be disgusted is to be human. But to love is to recognize when disgust is self-serving, and when it is holding us back from mercy and embrace of the other.

Ortman 7
Matthew 9:9-13
First Mennonite
6/4/23

May we love like Jesus, who broke down the barriers that keep "us" from
"the others," as we seek to be a glimpse of God's kingdom, on earth as it is in
heaven.

Amen