

In order to really understand what is going on in our gospel reading I think we want to start by thinking about those things that disgust us; those things we think of as dirty and unclean, stuff we don't want to touch. Before I was a parent I had quite a list of things I found disgusting. But like most parents you get used to having stuff come out of both ends of your child plus their ears and noses. Then add blood from various cuts, and the list of stuff you won't touch gets pretty short.

Still though, coming into contact with some things makes my skin crawl. Public toilet seats are disgusting. Something that will always stand out in my mind was when I was inspecting the Mid-Hudson Bridge in Poughkeepsie. Homeless people were living underneath it at one of the abutments. I had to inspect the abutments and the bridge joints so I had to go in among them and their stuff, which was strewn everywhere. The stench almost made me gag. Filthy dirty people with caked blood and matted hair huddled in sheets or sleeping bags. It was hard to still recognize them as humans. It felt weird to silently go among them, no one making eye contact as I moved their possessions to inspect the bridge joints I had to inspect.

That image is perhaps too vivid to set up our gospel reading, but it puts us in the right frame of mind. Our gospel writer Mark has nested one story inside another, in both of them about touch between Jesus and the disgusting is the main theme.

The whole scene is set when Jesus is asked to come and heal the sick daughter of a Jewish leader. A healing in and of itself is no big deal. But this time as Jesus is on his way to the house a crowd has gathered and is pressing in around him. We learn that there is a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. Let's not beat around the bush here. This is non-stop menstrual bleeding. We learn that she has spent all that she has on doctors for treatment but with no success.

Now remember in those days there were rules about ritual cleanliness and ritual uncleanness. It wasn't that big a deal to be ritually unclean. The fishermen Jesus hung out with were often ritually unclean. They'd catch catfish in their nets. Catfish were unclean animals and so touching them made a person unclean too. But that's no big deal, really. You only had to be ritually clean for religious ceremonies and going to the temple. Still though, many people avoided ritual defilement.

For a woman, menstruation made her unclean. A woman was to limit her physical contact with other people lest she make them unclean as well. For the woman in our gospel reading that meant twelve solid years of uncleanliness; twelve solid years of little or no contact with other human beings. Twelve years of being looked down upon, an outcast, an untouchable. It meant twelve years of not being allowed to go to the temple, maybe even limited worship in the synagogue. To be healed meant more than just a medical condition being taken care of. It meant being restored to dignity.

She commits to great outrages when she encounters Jesus. One, she has no money but hopes to be healed by Jesus. There weren't formal medical billing practices in those days, but if you sought a healer you were expected to pay. She has no money, so she is hoping to steal a healing from Jesus.

Her second outrage is actually touching the clothes of the holy man Jesus. To the average commoner of those days a religious man like Jesus was not to be defiled. He was to be kept clean. If you've ever thrown a dirty pair of pants into a basket full of clean laundry you know what happens. Does the clean laundry make the dirty piece clean too? Nope. It makes

the clean clothes dirty! Uncleanliness was contagious. Ritual cleanliness was not.

So, like a filthy homeless person living under a bridge; on the sly she tries to steal from him and defile him. There's no wonder she is terrified when he notices! Who knows what kind of wrath this popular rabbi will bring down upon her? But instead of pressing charges against her he approves of her and commends her for her faith.

What an odd thing for a holy man to do; not be upset about defilement. It is as if he makes dirty things clean. But that is only the first defilement. Jesus still hasn't gotten to the leader's daughter. By the time he arrives people are saying she is dead. Touching a corpse also causes defilement. He says she is only sleeping, but it is pretty safe to say she is dead. They weren't that medically primitive that they couldn't tell the difference between death and a deep sleep.

Jesus takes only a select few of his disciples and the girl's parents into the room with him. Notice the detail our gospel writer Mark is sure to include, "Taking her by the hand..." Again, touch of the unclean is brought out. But Jesus doesn't

die. She is restored to life, being able to hop up and walk around.

Today our altar starts its time in the center of the sanctuary for the summer. This text fits the reason for putting it here. In the same way Jesus didn't hole himself away in some clean and holy spot, so to our table of God does not remain removed on a raised platform and surrounded by railings; as though it would be contaminated by all of us.

Nothing is too filthy for God. Not a public toilet seat and not even mangy homeless people who don't even look like humans anymore. God goes into the midst of whatever dirt there is. And when God is there God brings about healing, wholeness and restoration. Even at the crucifixion, mangled beyond recognition, you'll remember Jesus was forgiving, restoring, and establishing new relationships between people.

I think we learn two things from all of this. One, there's no part of our own lives that is too dark, shameful, or disgusting for God to go. God will go there. God doesn't care. God only wants to bring about wholeness and healing in us.

And two, we learn to not become like the religious leaders of Jesus' day who didn't want him going into dirty places. They said he should stay clean and undefiled; for some people and places were too dirty, too far gone for God's love.

Jesus went anyway. Only those who thought themselves too clean excluded themselves from where Jesus would go. So when we see the person who disgusts us or repulses us, remember that Christ would actually go there.

It may not be within our power to raise a person up out of a dirty hole of a life and into restoration. But it is within our power to see that person as a child of God, made in the image of God, inherently valuable, because God made it so. And then treat that person as such.

Thanks be to God for God's willingness to walk in any mess we humans make. And even greater thanks for God's willingness to forgive, restore and clean up our messes. Amen