

St David's United  
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Clean and Unclean

There is a great story about Guru Nanak Dev Ji. He was one of the great teachers of Sikhi, which is, I have been told, the proper way to refer to that religion. We usually say something like Sikhism. Live and learn.

Guru Nanak went to Mecca, the holiest city in Islam. At nightfall the guru went to sleep on a large marble platform with his feet pointing the Kaba which is the house of God in Islam. As in many Eastern cultures, the feet are extremely unclean so it is a very serious matter what you do with your feet.

In the morning, a Maulvi, an expert in Islamic law, saw Guru Nanak asleep with his feet pointing toward the Kaba. The Maulvi excoriated Guru Nanak "How dare you sleep with your feet pointing towards Kaba, the house of God?" And he kicked poor old Guru Nanak who, feigning innocence, said. "In that case take hold of my feet and point them in a direction where God is not."

The Maulvi immediately saws the error of his ways and sat down and sang hymns with Guru Nanak. This of course is the Sikh version of the story. The Maulvi might tell the story differently.

Great religious teachers often are recorded in our Scriptures as acting out some great reversal of norms.

Jesus is a whole lot more to most Christians than just a great teacher. He is that however: Jesus is our rabbi and he is recorded as constantly breaking rules. Not just breaking them but reversing them. He turns religious/cultural teachings on their heads. He turns them inside out. Jesus has always been a matter of great interest to a great many people and Jesus has been interesting lately to philosophers: he is philosophically what one might call a deconstructionist. This is the infuriating school of philosophy championed by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Like Derrida, Jesus took things apart so they can be put back together in a way that is closer to the heart of God and more redemptive for human communities.

Jesus does this throughout the gospels and he does it in the passage from Mark we are reading today. The disciples are eating. But they are ignoring the relevant Jewish purity rituals around eating: they have not washed their hands. Oooo, gross. The Scribes and Pharisees in attendance (that is to say, our Maulvi) confront Jesus about his Disciples' error: "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition, but eat with unclean hands?"

Jesus is disgruntled. There is a tone of "Will these people never get it?" He says some rather uncharitable things about the Scribes and Pharisees and quotes Isaiah about people whose hearts are never seem to be in the right place.

And then he addresses the crowd more or less turing centuries of tradition on its head: "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can make them unclean, but the things that come out are what make them unclean."

There is nothing outside a person that can make that person unclean.

"Well, that's news. Human societies, human religions are pretty much organized around outward signs of purity, rituals of belonging, fitting in, playing the game. Of course, we know that your heart has to be in the right place. But we can't see your heart. All we can see is how you present yourself. So, please, please follow the rules. Just wash your hands before eating. Its a modest request."

But Jesus insists: there is nothing outside a person that can make that person unclean. Only what you say or what you do makes you unclean. Because only what you say or what you do comes from your heart. What you say, what you do reveals the posture of your heart and the content of your character.

Things that come from outside, things that you have no choice about, conditions you are born with or born into, these are accidents, not essence. Dirt on your hands. That doesn't make you unclean. Your skin colour doesn't make you unclean, your gender, your social class, illness, the neurological diversity your particular brain may represent: these things don't make you unclean.

It is not that Jesus rejects the notion of uncleanness altogether. What people do, and Jesus lists some of them: "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly." "All these evil things," he says, "come from within, and they do indeed make you unclean."

So Jesus does not reject the notion of uncleanness altogether. But he does deconstructs it. He takes the idea of uncleanness apart and divides it into two pieces. There is uncleanness from within which is a valid category and uncleanness which is from outside, and is not valid. And the crucial distinction is intention.

This I am sure, is where the Christian theology of sin comes from. For a thing to be legitimately unclean in Christian teaching, that is for it be a sin in Christianity, requires intention.

Something about me may be disgusting. It may be ugly, objectionable, not for public viewing. But these things are not sins.

For me this is the Gospel of Christ. It is existential freedom: the end of unnecessary, addiction-inducing, life-denying, soul-crushing shame. Sin, I can be ashamed of, I should be ashamed of.

But the self-loathing, the suffering over trivialities: do I look good enough, am I smart enough, wealthy enough, powerful enough, successful enough. That's all bullwhooley.

So we refuse to be ashamed. Thanks be to God.