

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“GIVE ME A CLEAN HEART”
February 15, 2009
Mark 1:40-45
8:45 & 11 A.M. Services**

Our world is full of estrangement and alienation, from the international level to the interpersonal level. So many of our hostilities are based on judgments made strictly in terms of outward appearances. It only requires a willingness to take a second look to see what is in another's heart.

In ancient Israel leprosy was the most dreaded of all diseases. It involved the decaying or wasting away of human flesh, and it was believed to be contagious. Worst of all, lepers were forced to live in isolation from family and friends.

The account of the healing of the leper illustrates the all-inclusive compassion of Jesus. He did not discriminate where human need was concerned. He reached out in acceptance and love to the physical outcasts and the moral misfits of his day. No person is so sick or sinful that they do not merit divine and human care.

The words “**dirty**” and “**clean**” are not always meant to be understood literally. Sometimes they are used symbolically or euphemistically. In the drug culture they refer to whether a person is “**using**” or not. In a criminal investigation, they refer to a suspect's guilt or innocence. Biblically, “**clean**” most often refers to purity of heart.

Imagine having an illness so dreadful and so threatening that you were officially excluded from society, including your family. Imagine being quarantined in groups of those who share your disease. Imagine being required to wear torn clothes and to let your hair grow long and loose so you

could be identified. Imagine having to cry, *“Unclean, unclean,”* whenever you saw someone who did not have your disease. Imagine that your only hope was someone like Jesus who had the power to heal you and make you clean.

Lepers represented one of the great tragedies of the biblical world. The ancient book of Leviticus (13-14) provides detailed and shocking requirements, including those we have mentioned, for the leper’s treatment. Today the name **“leprosy”** is used specifically of Hansen’s disease, but in Jesus’ time it referred several types of skin disease. It was not regarded as hopeless or incurable, but the priests were responsible for determining whether a leper was actually cured. The leper in today’s reading broke the law in approaching Jesus, so great was his need and his confidence that Jesus could heal him. Jesus had no fear of the leper, or of the law that required his isolation. He touched the leper and said, *“Be clean,”* and the leper was made whole.

There is a great deal in the New Testament about cleanliness. This may seem strange, since life in first-century Palestine was primitive regarding hygiene. One group of religious leaders, known as the scribes and Pharisees, had developed a complex system of *“cleanness”* and *“uncleanness.”* But such cleanliness was strictly religious and ceremonial. A person had to be ritually clean, for instance, in order to worship God. This system was not based on scripture but on an oral tradition that Jesus rejected. The system was not even based on morality. A person could become unclean in hundreds of unlikely ways, such as eating the wrong thing or touching the wrong thing. Also, uncleanness was contagious. Therefore, there was an elaborate system of washings whereby a person could become clean again. Jesus ignored these pointless rituals and insisted that true cleanness was a matter of the heart.

Symbolically we might see the leper as representing all of us before God. Have you ever felt unclean? Do you secretly feel unworthy of God’s favor? Many of us are haunted by a dark shadow of our own making. Perhaps you are held captive by feelings of guilt. Perhaps you are burdened by some secret shame. Perhaps you are preoccupied with the fear that something you have done will be discovered. Sometimes we are an enigma even to ourselves, finding in our hearts such mixed emotions and such appalling ambiguities. Like St. Paul, we fail to do the good we intended to do, and do the evil we intended to avoid. *“Wretched person that I am!”* exclaimed

Paul. (Rm 7) The great prophet Jeremiah understood the human condition. ***“The heart is deceitful above all things,”*** he said, ***“and desperately corrupt. Who can understand it?”*** (17:9). Don’t we belong among those who cry, ***“Unclean, unclean”***? We know we are unworthy of God’s favor. We know how badly we need to begin again. We want to pray with the psalmist, ***“Create in me a clean heart, O God.”*** (51:10)

The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for us all. No matter how far we have fallen from God’s will for us, we may approach God with confidence, knowing we will find acceptance and love. God does not require that we conform to superficial standards of cleanliness. Our confession of our need is enough. God’s love is no ordinary love, but is the original love that makes all love possible. God’s love not only accepts us, but transforms us. Old things are put aside, and all things become new. ***“God is love,”*** says the Bible, but it is love beyond all human loves. ***“The essence of God is not love, but holy love.”*** (P. T. Forsyth)

Why are our lives less satisfying than they should be? There is a memorable line in Boris Pasternak’s *Dr. Zhivago*: ***“We are born to live, not to prepare for life.”*** What keeps us from living fully? Probably not the things we think of first - - lack of money, lack of time, lack of opportunity. The people who have these things are generally no happier than we are. The problem for many of us is that we feel isolated in our pain and alienated by our guilt. Our condition, whether of our own making or not, causes us feeling like outcasts. It preys on our minds, weighs on our hearts, and robs us of the life we were meant to live.

There is good news. In Jesus’ response to the leper we see that we can trust in God’s understanding and compassion. We can acknowledge the darkness within us or all about us. We can accept our past suffering and our present need. We can find freedom in God’s acceptance and love. We can know the joy of a clean heart.

There is a small problem in this passage. Scholars are agreed that the phrase indicating that Jesus was ***“moved with pity”*** may be incorrect. The oldest manuscripts say that Jesus was ***“moved with anger.”*** Perhaps some scribe, thinking that anger was inappropriate in this setting, changed the word to ***“pity.”*** If this is what happened, it was unnecessary. Why wouldn’t Jesus respond with anger to the leper’s condition? Remember how angry Jesus was when he threw the moneychangers out of the temple. Why

wouldn't he be angry about a condition that relegated a person to the outer edges of society? Who wouldn't be angry about the dehumanizing aspects of this living death? This is God's Messiah. His anger is holy wrath against whatever diminishes humankind. According to rabbinical literature of the time, healing a leper was almost as difficult as raising the dead. The gospel is good news. Jesus is powerful to save.

Is **“cleanliness next to godliness”**? It may be truer to say that godliness is cleanliness. What is more godly than purity of heart? What higher aspiration could someone have than to pray, **“*Create in me a clean heart, O God*”**? True righteousness or goodness is an inward condition. Jesus taught that the essence of a person is whatever **“*proceeds from the heart.*”** (Mt 15:18-20) The psalmist prayed, **“*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*”** (Ps 51) When our hearts are clean, our lives are clean.

I invite you to be fully dedicated to the glory of God. If you are willing to invest your daily activities and relationships with faith, hope, and love, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.

PRAYER

Our world is full of estrangement and alienation, from the international level to the interpersonal level. So many of our hostilities are based on judgments made strictly in terms of outward appearances. Let us pray for the willingness to take a second look, that we may see what is in another's heart:

That couples who have drifted apart will look into each other's heart.
We pray to the Lord.

That nations alienated by war will see the possibilities of new beginnings.
We pray to the Lord.

That neighbors who hold each other in contempt will see each other in a new light.
We pray to the Lord.

That those who have injured others will seek forgiveness and reconciliation.
We pray to the Lord.

That those who have a narrow view of other religions will open their minds to better understanding.
We pray to the Lord.

That those who have withheld forgiveness will come to a new perception of the other person.
We pray to the Lord.

God of all, forgive us our unwillingness to see other people as they really are. Cleanse our hearts of all prejudice and thoughtless reactions. Create in us clean hearts, that we may see all people as your beloved children. Grant us patience with those we do not understand, and guide us to clearer visions of those we do not like. We pray in the name of Jesus, who loves all of us, each of us, and all others. Amen.