

**Theme: Too Messy / Series: Loving or Loathing,
Sermon 1: Are You Willing?
October 4, 2015**

Cody was digging in a dumpster behind pizzeria in Las Vegas, hunting for half eaten chicken wings and scraps of crust, when suddenly the hopelessness of his situation hit him with full force. "It's come to this – I'm eating out of a garbage can. I'm sleeping in the dirt. I'm filthy and I stink and I'm starving to death. And there's no way out. Oh, God. There's no future and no hope. Why are you doing this to me?" He collapsed in the trash and began to sob. The tears wouldn't stop. "If I had owned a gun, I would have put it in my mouth and pulled the trigger. I swear to you, I would have. I'd lost everything, I was an addict, I've been in and out of jail, I was homeless, I was shunned, every last ounce of my dignity was gone. I hated myself, I hated my life – – and I hated God." "That was the day I hit bottom. I couldn't go any lower. I was so hungry, I was so exhausted, I'm so desperate, I was so ashamed. I had nothing left. Do you know what it feels like? I had nothing and I was nothing." This is the story of Cody Huff. I'll tell you more about his life later.

I know you have seen a lot of Dixie cups over the last several weeks. Today, no Dixie cups and no experiments. Hopefully, we have established our theme—TOO Messy. If you are just joining us today, we've been talking about a theme that we will be using for the next several months. The theme is "too messy". The last several weeks, we have learned that when things are too messy, we tend to lean away from them. In fact, we kind of have a gag reflex that causes us to draw some lines in the sand or build some walls toward the things that disgust us. If you missed the introduction or the series called Gag Reflex, go to capitalcitychristian.org/resources/sermons-video.

It seems natural to be repulsed by certain foods. It even makes sense that spitting in a Dixie cup, bugs in a jar of water or a drop of urine in a glass of grape juice would keep you from drinking those things even if it was just a little bit. What is scary is that we are learning that we don't just draw lines

and build walls with food. We do it with people. If we are honest, we think some people are disgusting. Some people may be annoying. Some may seem creepy or scary. Some are different in color, shape or personality. Some have done some disgusting, possibly even sinful things. Today, we are going to see that Jesus did not see people as too messy. In fact, he went to the messy. He leaned into the messy. And maybe, we have to learn to lean in just like he did.

Today, we are going to be looking at an encounter that happens in Matthew 8. If you have a bible app, pull up Matthew 8, or it will be on the screens. Matthew 8:1 says, "Large crowds followed Jesus as he came down the mountainside." They are coming down a mountain and think about what is right before Matthew 8. Matthew 5-7 is called the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Jesus told them he has come to fulfill the Law. He gave them different ways of thinking about things like murder and adultery. He also told how to be happy. He taught them about the Beatitudes, which were ways of living that bring happiness and blessed life. One of the beatitudes is "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." This is exactly what we have been talking about up to this point. Do you remember in Matthew 9, when Jesus goes to Matthew, the tax collector's, house? The religious people can't believe that he is eating with "those" people. And Jesus responded, "Healthy people don't need a doctor-sick people do. Now go and learn the meaning of the Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.'"

The next verse, **Matthew** 8:2, says, "Suddenly, a man with leprosy approached him and knelt before him." I wonder if Matthew puts "suddenly" to connect what Jesus just taught about mercy and now the chance to put it into practice.

Leprosy was a skin ailment that caused a lot of suffering for the one who had it. You can imagine it caused physical suffering, but it seems to have caused greater emotional, social and spiritual suffering. You were seen as cursed by God. Jewish people abhorred anyone with leprosy, because it rendered, not only the person with leprosy unclean, but anyone who came

in contact with him unclean. Jewish law had specific instructions for people with leprosy. “Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ As long as they have the disease, they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.” Can you imagine that life?

Kneeling before Jesus, he says, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” I think this guy had great courage and great faith, probably out of desperation. This man had only heard about Jesus. Because of his leprosy, he wasn’t like all the other people, who got to hear and see Jesus. He was excluded. He was expelled from normal society. Humanity had built a boundary to keep him out.

Notice what this man says, “If you are willing.” He doesn’t say, “If you can.” I believe he has no doubt that Jesus can heal. He just wants to know if Jesus cares. Is Jesus willing? Is Jesus willing to lean into his mess? Why would this man question Jesus willingness? Of all people, why question the guy who has been healing everyone? Maybe it gives us insight into messy people’s lives that there is no hope and no one, not even Jesus himself cares.

Look at Jesus response in Matthew 8:3 “Jesus reached out and touched him.” Jesus touched the man with leprosy. Jesus does something before he says anything. If we take all we have learned about over the last several weeks about our gag reflex, things that contaminate and mix it with Jewish law. Reaching out and touching the leper would contaminate Jesus and cause him to be unclean. Before we go on, I want you to understand Jesus mindset about what was going on. Mark, a disciple just like Matthew, wrote about this encounter in his book as well. He starts telling about Jesus preaching and healing right away. In chapter 1:41, Mark writes, “Moved with anger, Jesus reached out and touched him.” Some of your versions may say, “Moved with compassion.” This is the same emotion that we talked about when Jesus stood in front of the tomb of Lazarus and cried. It wasn’t a sad cry. It was an angry cry. It was anger

over what sin had done through death and the pain it caused. This encounter with the man with leprosy is no different. I think Jesus was angry at Satan. I think he was angry at sin. Sin had not only affected this man physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually. Sin had affected the way people saw this man. Sin had created a gag reflex within people to treat this man less than a human being.

Maybe you can't believe that people would treat someone so badly. We have to remember that we too, have a gag reflex. We also, treat people with disgust and it seems we have a new way to do that as of October 2015. Have you seen the new ***Peep*** app. Peep, the app, is the same thing as Yelp for, well, people. Yelp allows you to rate restaurants and other things. Peep allows you to rate your fellow human beings based on things like about their personalities, their professionalism, and how good they are at dating. There's no opt-out, either. If you are drawing breath, someone—anyone—with the app can rate you and there's nothing you can do about it. Users can assign reviews and one- to five-star ratings to anyone they know, and you can't opt out once someone puts your name in the Peep system. The Washington Post called it "terrifying". This is the same kind of thing that angered Jesus.

Jesus reaches out and touches the man and look what he says, "I am willing." Jesus showed him and told him that he was willing. His actions and words reveal a life that was willing to lean in. Remember Jesus said, "I desire mercy over sacrifice." I think he is telling us, "I don't just desire mercy over sacrifice. I am going to show you mercy over sacrifice. My life, not just this encounter, is going live out mercy over sacrifice." But Jesus words and actions did more than show his willingness. It showed so much more. It showed that this man had value. In Jesus world, he was included. Underneath his skin disease, was a man with the image of God.

Jesus says one more thing after "I am willing." He says, "Be healed' and instantly the leprosy disappeared." You have to get this, because it goes against everything we have talked about with how we think about disgust and contamination. When Jesus touches, nothing remains defiled. Jesus

makes unclean—clean. He is willing to lean in to the mess **and** he has the power and authority to bring healing and transformation to the mess.

Let's get back to the story of Cody Huff. Cody had done lots of drugs, he had spent a total of 8 years in prison and he was homeless. Cody was living in a field with other homeless people. He said that he smelled so bad that even the homeless people didn't want to be around him. They would say, "Cody, you stink. You need a bath." Another homeless man told him about Central Christian Church. They would let the homeless come and take a shower, shave, get clean clothes, have breakfast and go to the service if they wanted. Cody just happened to show up on a Sunday. He was given a number to wait for a shower. There were other homeless men milling around and there were tables with coffee and food. Cody didn't notice, but a small middle-aged woman named Michelle was walking over to him. She said, "Sir? You look like you need a hug." Cody said, "Ma'am, I haven't taken a shower in 3 months and I smell horrible." "You don't smell to me," Michelle said and wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. "Do you know that Jesus loves you?" she said. Cody thought "Jesus can't love me, I'm homeless. Jesus can't love me. I'm a drug addict. I'm a bad man." Michelle said it again, "Jesus love you."

After that encounter, **Cody** said, "Plain and simple. That hug and those words sparked something inside of me. It was like a personal encounter with Jesus. It was love—pure love. She didn't care what I looked like or how much I smelled. It was like Jesus himself was standing in front of me and saying, "Cody, I love you."

This is what Jesus modeled and what he is trying to develop in his disciples. Jesus said, "So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other...Just as I have loved you." He also said, "Love your neighbor as yourself" and "Love your enemies". It seems like he is doing everything possible to erase the lines we have drawn and the walls we have built.

In Acts 10, Peter is praying on a roof. It is about noon and he is hungry. As he is praying, he falls into a trance. He sees this sheet come down out

of the sky like a picnic blanket and it has all kinds of animals on it, clean and unclean. Things a Jewish man was supposed to eat and things that were forbidden. They were together. He hears a voice that says, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat them." "No, Lord," Peter declared. "I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean." But the voice spoke again: "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean." This vision happened three times then it was gone. The voice was the voice of God. God has come to the same conclusion that we have. It is not about food, it is about people and he can make them clean. So, don't you dare draw a line! Don't you dare build a wall when it comes to people!

Before this event with Peter, we are introduced to a man named Cornelius in another city. We are told that he is a Roman army officer, God-fearing, generous to the poor and prayed regularly to God. The main thing to know about this man was that he was a Gentile. Jews looked down on Gentiles. The early church had significant growth, but it hit a wall. It was its' own wall that it had built toward Gentiles.

Cornelius was praying during the day and he had a vision of an angel coming toward him. The angel told him to send for a man named Peter, so he sends for Peter to come to his house. Peter goes to his house because the Holy Spirit tells him to go. When he arrives at Cornelius's house, **he** says, "You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean." Cornelius says, "We need to hear the message God has given you?" As Peter spoke to this family, we are told the Holy Spirit came upon them and they were baptized.

I hope you see that this series, ***Loving and Loathing***, has very little to do with food, but has everything to do with people. People are why Jesus leaned in. People are why he reached on and touched. People are why he said, "Be healed." That is why we have to get this message. There is a Cornelius in your life, whose eternity depends on it.

In reading this week, one person noted that within Matthew 8 and 9 there are 10 different miracles that Jesus does. He paralleled the number 10 to the Exodus of the Israelites of the Old Testament. There were 10 plagues, but the overarching theme was Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery. His question was, "Is Jesus trying to lead us out of a slavery or a mentality of disgust toward people? Have we become shackled to irrational ideas of contamination, exclusion and expulsion when it comes to people? Is Jesus trying to break down the boundaries and walls that we have created that separate us from people?"

I think Jesus is doing everything he can to change us and transform us, because when we are changed, we reach out and touch and we let people know we are willing and this opens the door for God to bring change in their life. I think Jesus knows that mercy will be impossible for us if we have disgust toward other people. So, who is it for you? Is it white people, black people, Hispanic people, middle-eastern or Asian people? Are their people you see in the news that turns your stomach? I found the top 10 most hated people? I just put the living ones. They are real people. I received an article a while back entitled, "What if Miley Cyrus wanted to join your Life Group?" They listed some of her statements from a Fox News Interview. They asked her about Noah's Ark. "That's *&%#\$ insane," she says. "We've outgrown that fairy tale, like we've outgrown *&%#\$ Santa and the tooth fairy." They asked her about sexuality. "I am literally open to every single thing that is consenting and doesn't involve an animal and everyone is of age. Everything that's legal, I'm down with. Yo, I'm down with any adult — anyone over the age of 18 who is down to love me," she says. "I don't relate to being boy or girl, and I don't have to have my partner relate to boy or girl."

Maybe the disgust is really personal. Maybe you have been hurt by a family member. Is it a father, a spouse or a close friend?

Back to Cody's story...After the encounter with Michelle at church, 3 weeks later Cody was baptized. He just began coming to church. He said, "I didn't really know anything about the Bible, except God loves me, Jesus

died for me, I'm a sinner, forgiveness is available—and I wanted it.” He also began volunteering and serving in the homeless ministry. Let me take you to 8 years later. Cody is an ordained minister at Hope Church in Las Vegas. He is the volunteer Director of Broken Chains, a ministry that feeds and houses the homeless of Las Vegas. Do you know where they do ministry? They do ministry in the same field that Cody laid in for so many years as a homeless man.

Who knows what God can do when we willing lean in like Jesus and tell others about the healing he offers?