

TOØ MESSY / Unit 1: Gag Reflex
Sermon 2: Contagion (Luke 7)
September 27, 2015

I think if you missed last week you missed some quite interesting, and really important. Even if you are not a Jesus follower, what we dug into last week should have helped you understand a bit more about yourself, and why you treat people the way you do. And if you are a Jesus follower, what we unpacked past week is critical to living a God-honoring life. Last week was kind of disgusting, but it was good stuff.

(Dixie cups) Do you remember these? They helped illustrate a powerfully important idea. Here it is: We build walls that God does not honor (walls that keep people out). And the walls we build cripple us whenever we try to present God's grace and God's truth to a messy world. We build walls that are not God-honoring. And the walls we build undermine the grace and truth God tells us to present to his world.

We kind of played with the idea of "disgust." If you remember, I led you through a classic experiment. What if you worked up a mouthful of saliva and spit it into your Dixie cup. Would you be willing to put that cup back to your lips and drink it down? It's kind of disgusting. And our response is also quite irrational. I swallow my saliva all the time, never give it a passing thought. You don't either. But once I expel it, once my saliva becomes spit, the thought of swallowing it is disgusting. Now that's weird. Same stuff, but saliva is fine, and spit is not. Because saliva is on the inside, and spit is on the outside; and we treat inside things differently than we treat outside things. People too. We treat insiders differently than we treat outsiders. In fact we build walls to protect ourselves from outsiders – walls that God does not honor.

We actually explored 3 ideas about disgust last week.

- One: Disgust sets boundaries. We don't want whatever is disgusting to violate our boundaries – our walls.
- Two: Disgust is expulsive. If something is disgusting, or if someone is disgusting, if they violate our walls, we want to eject them, spit them out.
- And three: disgust is learned. Babies aren't disgusted by gum they find on the sidewalk, or by playing in the toilet water, or by eating the

cat food. And they are not disgusted by people who are a different color, or a different shape, or who are not as pretty, or as smart, or as rich as the people we fawn over. We teach our children disgust. And what they learn young is so very, very hard to unlearn.

And then we studied a story about Jesus, when he calls Matthew, a tax collector, to be his disciple. He goes to a party at Matthew's house where all the guests are other tax collectors and sinners. And the Pharisees – the religious elite -- are scandalized. And here's what Jesus says. He said, "Go and ponder what God meant when he told you, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" God desires mercy, not sacrifice. You see, sacrifice is about getting clean, it's about staying clean. Mercy is about getting dirty with someone else's mess. Sacrifice is about separating myself from anything that might make me impure; it's about leaning away from the impure. Mercy is about leaning in. Sacrifice is about me, how things affect me; mercy is about you.

And God doesn't say, "I desire mercy and sacrifice." That's what I would have expected God to say; because in reality, he requires both. Instead he says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Because when they clash – and they will, God says, "Mercy wins." You see, God is revealing his priorities. Sacrifice is important, our holiness, our purity is important to God. But our mercy, our grace, our compassion is ... more important, to God. When it comes to a choice between staying clean, and getting your hands dirty for God, when those options clash – and they will – God says, "You choose mercy, you choose grace." Jesus followers do not lean away from the disgusting, the messy, we lean in.

Now, I am going to assume all that stuff this morning, and kind of move forward to the next piece. So ... how many of you guys find certain foods just disgusting (like ... vegetables). It's more than just tasting bad, they actually nauseate you, they make you want to throw up. I found these disgusting foods on a website. I think I'd rather throw up than eat them, and I filtered out the worst! ...

- Escamoles (the larvae of venomous ants), Mexico. They put them in tacos and omelettes.
- Tarantulas, Cambodia. They deep fry them, and eat them as snacks.
- Ant Egg Soup, Laos. Apparently they taste a little bit like shrimp. I hope I never test that for myself.

- Boshintang (dog meat), Korea. Now that actually looks pretty good: Spring onions, dandelion greens ... and a bit of dog meat.
- Airag (fermented horse milk) Mongolia. Fizzy, sour, slightly alcoholic. My dad drank stuff similar to that in Kenya.
- Casu Marzu (rotten cheese, with maggots), Italy. This one is ridiculous. They actually add the larvae of cheese flies to the cheese – on purpose! They let them hatch, and burrow around digesting the fats.
- Locusts, Israel. If you can't beat them, eat them.

Now that stuff is distusting ... to me. But sometimes the food is actually good food, it just comes into contact with something disgusting. Like, dropping your food on the floor. Any of you guys apply the 5 second rule? They are actually studying the science of that right now. It depends on what the floor is made out of, and the consistency of the food you drop. Or maybe, finding a hair in your food. Does that disgust you? Now at home I suspect you just pull it out (at least I hope you do). But have you ever sent food back at a restaurant because of a hair in your green beans, or a fly in your soup? Here are a couple of fly in your soup jokes for you ...

- “Waiter, there is a fly in my soup.” “Calm down, calm down. Don't you see the spider on your spoon? It will be okay”
- “Waiter, there are 3 flies in my soup!” “Sir, you are so lucky! The recipe only calls for one!”
- “Waiter, there is a dead fly in my soup!” “Mam, I am so sorry, I shall get you a new one.”

You see, sometimes our disgust is perfectly legitimate. After all, it's supposed to be a defense mechanism. It's supposed to keep us from putting something into our mouth that could make us sick. But ... sometimes our disgust is flat-out irrational. I kind of think our culture is growing more and more germaphobic – to the point where it is silly and even self-destructive. A lot of folks are just too obsessive about good, healthy dirt. And even when we know a food won't hurt us, we still recoil. You can pull the hair out of your green-beans, you'll be fine. You can scoop the fly out of your soup. Or if you are Bear Grylls, just eat it – it's just protein. But disgust kind of trumps logic, doesn't it?

Let's do an experiment to see how irrational we can be. I have a pitcher of lemonade. Excellent lemonade (sample). Anyone really like lemonade? Come on up here... How's it taste?

- Now, what if ... *stir crickets and night crawlers into the pitcher of lemonade*. Would you drink it now? How many of you think _____ should go ahead and take a sip.
- Now, you guys saw our kids using this lifestraw. It is an amazing device. It removes 99.9999% of waterborne bacteria. It removes 99.9% of waterborne protozoa – stuff like Giardia and Cryptosporidium. It goes way beyond EPA standards. How many of you guys would drink this lemonade through this lifestraw? How many of you guys would still be a bit queasy? _____, would you? Did you know that a lot of people wouldn't, even though they know logically that it is safe? Did you know that most people would be a bit squeamish, even though they know it is perfectly safe? ... Why is that?

Because here's the deal, disgust trumps logic. It doesn't matter that we know intellectually that whatever we drink through this straw will be pure. It doesn't matter that any contaminants from those bugs probably wouldn't hurt us anyway – in fact, they might be nutritious. Truth is, you eat way more insect in any candy-bar! And you wouldn't believe how much junk is in a hotdog! The truth is, when contamination and reason clash, reason usually loses. Contamination logic operates by a completely different set of rules.

Now, psychologists talk about what they call "sympathetic magic." And here are a couple of the rules of sympathetic magic: (1) If something looks like something else, they are connected – the rule of similarity. And (2) Part of me leaks into whatever I touch – the rule of contact. Similarity and contact – they are almost magical.

We laugh at others when they are taken in by sympathetic magic. Voodoo dolls. Come on! You create a doll that vaguely looks like the person you want power over. And then you take something from that person and add it to your doll: a piece of hair, a piece of their clothes. And now there is some supposed connection between this doll and that person. And what you do to that doll can be felt by that person, right? Primitive,

superstitious, drivel. Smart, sophisticated, educated people like us would never be taken in by that nonsense, right?

But the psychologists say we smart, sophisticated, educated people practice our own forms of sympathetic magic. If something looks disgusting, even though we know it's not, we lean away – the rule of similarity.

- Would you eat brownies shaped like these? Kind of disgusting! A lot of people won't touch them, even though they know they are brownies!
- They offer lemonade to people in a brand new bedpan. People refuse to drink it. They know it's lemonade, they know the bedpan is brand new. But it looks too much like urine.
- There are restaurants in Japan that serve their food in toilets. Sparkling clean toilets, but still, some people just won't eat the food. That's kind of irrational, isn't it? But because it looks like something else, something other than serving bowl. So it triggers disgust, and our response is anything but rational.

If it looks disgusting, we lean away – even if leaning away is irrational. And if it has come into contact with something disgusting, we lean away, even if leaning away is irrational. One of the guys who writes on this stuff illustrates it like this. What if your grandfather had, in his closet, an old box. And in that box is a sweater your grandfather brought home from the WW2. It's not his sweater, it's a sweater that was worn by Adolf Hitler. He got it when they finally reached the bunker where Hitler committed suicide. In fact, he's got pictures of Hitler wearing that sweater. It's never been washed – it still has stains from Hitler's sweat. And your grandfather asks you, "Would you like to put it on?" Would you do it?

Researchers tell us that a whole lot of people will not put it on. In fact, a whole lot of people don't even want to be in the same room with the sweater. It's almost like Hitler's evil is a virus, or a disease. It's sticky, and if you touch anything he touched, it's contagious. Now that's irrational – we know it's irrational – but we still lean away, so it doesn't infect us.

It's so weird. We are superstitious, aren't we? If it looks like something disgusting, we lean away – even if we know it's not. If it has been touched by something disgusting, we lean away – even though we know it can't rub

off, on us. And we have this awful, terrible idea that once disgusting, always disgusting. Once something has been defiled, we kind of act like it will always be defiled, it could never be purified. We don't trust this "lifestraw." Just like we don't trust ... the forgiveness and the purity graced by God.

You see, this stuff isn't just weirdly interesting; this stuff drives how we do life. This stuff drives whether we do life God's way, or not. This stuff drives whether we will be capable of being dispensers of God's grace and truth – like he calls us to be. Because I'm not talking about food, and sweaters; I'm talking about people. Because disgust migrates. It migrates from the dinner table to the way we treat people. It shapes who we are, and how we behave, socially, and morally, and religiously.

And it was just like that when Jesus was here. Jesus entered into a world – our world – in which people believed that just touching someone who was evil would contaminate you. And even if that person had been cleansed, by God, their evil still lingered, and touching them could contaminate you.

We saw it in the story we unpacked last week. Jesus calls a tax collector to be a disciple – the kind of guy good people didn't want to be around. It was bad enough for Matthew to rub shoulders with the other disciples, but then Matthew invites Jesus ... into his house! ... for a party where he would be hanging out with (which means touched by!) other tax collectors and sinners. That was scandalous! Just being in the house was bad enough! He actually ate dinner with these lowlifes. He ate defiled food with defiled people! How could he not be defiled?! And couldn't his partying with these lowlifes be interpreted as condoning their sin? That's the way a lot of us would think... But when people were messy, Jesus leaned in – with grace, and truth. Aren't you glad, personally? Jesus never compromised truth, but he never ran out of grace either.

Well, today I want to dig into another encounter with Jesus. This one is found in Luke 7. So if you have a Bible with you, or a Bible app on your phone or tablet, find Luke 7. We'll be jumping in at verse 36. The verses will be on the screen as well. Here goes...

Luke 7.36: “One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to have dinner with him, so Jesus went to his home and sat down to eat.” So last week we saw Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, and this week he’s eating with one of the Pharisees. The tax collectors and sinners were the despised; the Pharisees were the despisers. Jesus loves them both – his is an indiscriminate grace. That’s hard to do, for a whole lot of us.

Verse 37, it says, “When a certain immoral woman from that city heard he was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume.” Now it doesn’t say what her immorality was. Most people think, “prostitute.” Could be. Or adulteress. Fact is, in that world, you could be an immoral woman for going to the wrong church. I don’t know; I suspect she had a reputation as a tramp, or a whore. Anyway, often times when some prominent person had a distinguished guest over for dinner, they could leave their doors open, so that other people could slip in, and sit quietly along the walls, and listen in to the conversation. And sometimes, after the meal, the poor would beg for the leftovers. But this woman wasn’t there to quietly listen, or to beg for leftovers.

Verse 38: It says, “She stepped forward and knelt behind Jesus at his feet, weeping. And her tears were falling on his feet, and she was wiping them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them.” Guys, that took guts! Can you picture the scene in your mind? Jesus is laying there, his feet out. That sounds kind of weird, but they wouldn’t be sitting in chairs like at your house. They are kind of laying down on some cushions. Their feet are kind of pointing out from the table – perfect for tickling, or fondling.

And this ... whore ... does something so brash. She steps forward to anoint Jesus feet with this expensive perfume, but she is crying. And I’m not talking a single tear running down her cheek. The word Luke picks is kind of like she’s raining tears. They are just pouring out, and getting all over Jesus feet. So she pulls the comb out of her hair, and let’s her hair down ... right there in front of all these people. Did you know that in that world, if she was married, that would be grounds for divorce? And she uses her hair to wipe the mud off his feet? Are you serious? And the language Luke uses. He keeps using these imperfect tenses, which means that this scene isn’t quick. The weeping, the wiping, the kissing, the anointing – they took time. Can you imagine how uncomfortable, how embarrassed that would make you feel? If you were the host? If you were

one of the guests? If you were ... Jesus? Well ... not if you were Jesus. Jesus was different; the kind of different I want to be; the kind of different I want you to be.

Now the Pharisee, a guy named Simon, is outraged. This travesty is taking place in his house, at his table. He is disgusted with the woman, and he is disgusted with Jesus, for letting her contaminate him – at his table! Luke says, “When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw this, he said to himself, “If this man (Jesus) were a prophet (like people think he is), he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She’s a sinner!”

And here’s what’s going on. He is engaging in the same kind of irrational sympathetic magic that we struggle with. This woman is a sinner. So her very touch is contaminating Jesus. She’s a carrier; she’s contaminated; she’s contagious. And if evil is contagious, then a good man has to lean away. Simon thinks the God-honoring thing is to lean away. Jesus thinks the God-honoring thing is to lean in. Because, “I desire mercy, God says, not sacrifice.” When purity and grace clash – and they will – we choose grace.

But this illogic is so deeply entrenched in Simon, it’s so obvious to him, that his conclusion is: “This Jesus is no prophet!” If Jesus were a prophet, he’d know what kind of woman she was; and no good, God-honoring man would let a woman like this touch his feet, and wash them with her tears and her hair, and kiss them – right there in front of everybody. Right? Right? ... Right?

It’s no wonder the sinners flocked to Jesus, and they run from us, his followers. Because he leaned in to the messy (thank God); whereas we tend to lean away. Guys, we are on a mission from God. We have been touched by God’s grace, and God’s truth. And it is our honor, our privilege, our mission from God to pass that grace and truth on. But we’ll never get it done until we learn to lean in ... like Jesus. Do you buy that? Does it matter to you?

Sometimes it’s outside these walls. Maybe at work, maybe at school, maybe with you neighbors.

- There are people out there who are viewed as, who are treated like outcasts. Do they see something different in your eyes? Do they feel something different from your touch?
- There are people out there who misbehave, they do things that are ... disgusting. Do they see in you not only God's truth, but God's grace? Do you think you have ever done anything that disqualifies you from God's grace? They haven't either. And it's what they are looking for, whether they know it or not.
- Too many people out there judge people by the name of their family, or the color of their skin, or by where they live, or what they wear, or what they drive, or how they talk, or what music they listen to, or how they vote. Walls – God does not honor. Walls we cannot build, if we are serious about God's truth and God's grace.
- TorT

But it guides what we do inside these walls too.

- There are “Jesus followers” in every church who are inclined to hold people hostage for decisions they have made or things they have done in their past. Guys, some sins are like a bad tattoo – you just have to live with it. Aren't you grateful you never made such poor choices? Or more accurately: Aren't you grateful your friends and your neighbors don't know your dark secrets?
- But God know them, and he still loves you. Why is it that what God forgives, we God-followers can't let go of? Why is it that we still hear, that maybe we still feel something like this: “God may forgive you, but I never will.” As if you are a higher tribunal than God?

I've lived my life in churches full of good people who held brothers and sisters hostage because of sins they are struggling with in the present, or sins they battled in the past. You can't serve in the Kingdom because of your divorce; because of your prison record; because of your reputation ... who you were, what you did. Well ... not here. I am grateful we can create a place full of people who recognize all of us have a past ... forgiven; and a future secure regardless of what's back there because we have a Savior who loves us with an inexhaustible grace.

I didn't tell you the end of the story in Luke 7. At the end of the scene Jesus says to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.” He didn't condone her sin. Jesus never compromised on God's truth. But the grace! He says,

“Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (48-50) May they see that in us.
May they hear that from us.