

## **TOØ MESSY / Unit 2: Loving and Loathing**

### **Sermon 4: “Don’t call unclean ...”**

**November 1, 2015**

My wife does it to me sometimes. I’ll clean something up, and she’ll look at it, and shake her head, and she has the audacity to think it’s still dirty. Does that ever happen to any of you guys? We’ll have people coming over, and I’ll clean things up, and she’ll look at it and say – “Stephen, we’ve got people coming over! We need to clean things up!”

I’ve seen my daughter do it to my grandson. He’ll clean himself up for school or for church – he’ll wash his hands and his face, and Alathea will send him back to do it again. Sometimes repeatedly. You see, what kids call clean is not always what mommas call clean. You mommas with me on that one?

Now that stuff is petty, and amusing – one person’s clean isn’t always another person’s clean. The trouble comes when we try it with God. God says, “Clean.” And we say, “Not clean enough, in my book.” Have you ever heard anyone say, “God may forgive him, but I won’t”? Pretty dangerous words. Maybe you’ve never said it, but you’ve thought it. “My standards are higher than God’s standards.” Really? You really don’t want to go there.

Well, here’s the big idea this morning. I’m going to spell it out right at beginning so we don’t miss it. If we get this the rest of the stuff we’re going to talk about will make sense. If you don’t get this you’re going to have issues with where we’re going this morning. Here it is: “Don’t call something unclean if God has made it clean.” (Acts 10.15) Those are the words of God to the apostle Peter, and to us. God says, “Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean.” Don’t play God. The Message puts it like this: “If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.” You buy that?

Now, as a pastor, I always dread this part of the year. Our open forum was last week, our congregational meeting is a week from Wednesday. Budgets, and numbers, and stuff like that. Sometimes there are tensions as our visions of the church clash. Now fortunately our open forum was very calm. But in my report I touch on worship numbers. Usually we grow. Most churches don’t, we usually do. But this last year our numbers were flat, which is kind of depressing to me. I touch on our giving

numbers. Ours were pretty strong. Even though our worship numbers were flat, our giving got stronger. God is gracious. And then I touched on the number of people who have joined our church, and the number of people we have baptized.

We are about where we have been. And since Capital City has been a growing church for 20 years, our numbers are better than average. But they are not good enough. And the older I get, the more frustrated I get with the number of people we baptize. You see, you can grow a church by attracting Christians, or you can grow a church by making new Christians. We have always done very well at the first, and we've never done well enough at the second. And the older I get, the more that bothers me.

I don't know why. I suspect my motives are not entirely pure. I have always battled pride, and one way preachers keep score is by how many baptisms they have at their church. I struggle with on that one too, guys.

Or maybe it is fear. I have always battled fear too. Here's what God tells Ezekiel, the prophet. It's a word from God that some of us pastors takes personally. God says, "I've made you a watchman for the family of Israel. (In my case, a watchman for you, and for the people of Franklin County. God says,) Whenever you hear me say something, warn them for me. If I say to the wicked, 'You are going to die,' and you don't sound the alarm ... they will die and it will be your fault. I'll hold you responsible. (Well I don't want that! That terrifies me.) But (he says,) if you warn the wicked and they keep right on sinning anyway, they'll most certainly die for their sin, but *you* won't die. You'll have saved your life." (Ezekiel 3.17-19) To be honest, my preaching has a self-serving element to it. I don't want to have to explain to God why I didn't do my best for him while people around us are going to hell.

But it's not just about me ... really. Guys, I really believe this stuff. I really believe that being a Jesus follower is the best way to do life in this world. I really believe that God is smarter than we are, and better than we are, and that doing life his way is infinitely superior to doing life my way, or your way. So I think this baptistery is a doorway to a better life in this world.

And I also believe that Jesus is the only way to keep doing life with God after we die. Guys, if we care about people we've got to point them

towards heaven. It's kind of like what Penn Gillette said. You know – the Penn and Teller guy? He's an atheist, but here's what he says. He says, "If you believe that there is a Heaven and a Hell, and people could be going to Hell ... and you think it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward, ... how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?"

Guys, this stuff burns at me. Does it burn at you? Jesus said, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. (That means, when he speaks we're supposed to listen. Then he says,) Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (He says,) Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you." Guys, does that sound like God is asking for a favor from us? Like he's making a request? Doesn't to me either. And so if you won't do it for them, do it for him.

Now those words from Jesus ought to be enough for a Jesus follower to get it done. But then, I think he fires that passion up inside us through the Holy Spirit that he plants in us. Did you know that when you become a Jesus follower, God puts his Spirit right inside you? And did you know that what the Holy Spirit inside you is trying to do is to help you love what God loves, and hate what God hates? You see, God has this passion for those who are lost, a passion so passionate that he sent his Son to die for us. And he's trying to stir that passion in us. If the Holy Spirit is in you, you have felt God's passion for the lost.

Have you ever felt tears as you have watched someone come face to face with Jesus and embrace his grace? Have you ever felt pure joy as you watched someone come up out of this water? Have you ever wept at the thought of someone you love never coming to Jesus? Have you ever lost sleep because someone you love is pushing Jesus away? Did you know that what you are feeling is just a fraction of what God feels for that person you love? Did you know that the passion you feel is driven, at least in part, by the Holy Spirit of God inside you stirring you to hate what God hates – to hate the sin this is killing his kids, and to love what God loves – to love bringing his kids face to face with Jesus?

And so, for some inexplicable reason, God gives us the mission of taking Jesus into our world. And despite the fact that most of us here at Capital City do want people to come to Jesus, we are still not very good at baptizing people. Why is that? What's holding us back? Well, I'm going to focus in on just one reason, a really big one. God says, "Don't call something unclean if I have made it clean." And he's not talking about stuff; he's talking about people. If God says they are okay, we don't have the right to push them away. Do you buy that?

So ... what kind of people disgust you? Is there some group of people you just don't want to be around? Who is it, that if they dropped off the face of the earth, you'd be tempted to say, "Good riddance, we're better off without them." When Randy and I were talking about this stuff last week he said, for his father-in-law it was the Japs. The old guy was still fighting World War 2 when he died – he still hated the Japs. For his mother-in-law it was the blacks (though that was not the term she used). She hated blacks. For Randy ... he says it is those who are on perpetual welfare, who turn entitlement and taking into a vocation. They disgust him, he says. For me ... I suppose I have too many on my list. Racists disgust me. Bullies disgust me. Arrogant, snobbish, condescending sophisticates disgust me. People who are self-absorbed and demanding disgust me.

Do you have a list ... of people who disgust you? I found this one online, the top 10 most annoying, disgusting kinds of people. #1: Religious nutjobs. #2: Stupid, spoiled, whiny brats. #3: Politicians. #4: PETA Extremists (I thought that one was kind of funny). #5: Liberals. #6: Bullies. #7: Racists. #8: Inconsiderate people. #9: Thugs. #10: Liars. And other people kept adding to the online list: pretentious people, extreme feminists, conservatives, self-centered people, hypocrites, braggers, people who record everything they do on Facebook or Twitter. There were actually 170 different kinds of people on the list... Any of them on yours?

Well ... how many kinds of people do you think are on God's list? How many groups of people disgust him? Now I'm not asking if God likes what they are doing; I am asking who it is that God hopes will just die and go to hell? Who has God quit on? Who is it that God no longer values, no longer loves? And yet ... sometimes those people make lists. And aren't they the people God was talking about when he told Peter ... "Don't you dare call someone unclean that God can make clean"?

So God had some work to do on Peter, and the early Jewish Christians. You see, God had given them a job to do, a mission. They were to take Jesus into their world – into all their world. But there were places these early Christians didn't want to go, and there were people these early Christians didn't want to go to. They didn't want to be around Gentiles, they didn't want to touch them, they didn't want them messing up their churches. So how is God going to use a Peter to reach a Cornelius, when guys like Cornelius disgusted guys like Peter? You see, Peter is a Jew, and Cornelius is a Gentile; and Jews despised Gentiles. They were ... unclean, they were messy, they were unholy, they were uncircumcised, they were pollutants ... contaminants ... they thought. So God had some work to do on these early Christians, whose job it was to take God's truth and God's grace to people they despised.

So God gives Peter a vision. It says, (Acts 10.9-16) It was about noon, and Peter is hungry. But while they were preparing food for Peter to eat, he falls into a trance. It says, Peter saw the sky open somehow, and he saw something like a large sheet let down from the sky by its four corners. And in the sheet are all sorts of animals, and reptiles, and birds – the kind of animals and reptiles and birds that a good Jew is not supposed to eat. You know that Jews aren't supposed to eat pork. Well in their laws there are actually a boatload of critters Jews aren't supposed to eat. And this sheet is full of them.

Then a voice from heaven says to Peter, "Now get up; and kill them, and eat them." And Peter knew exactly who was talking to him. He says, "No way, Lord." He says, "I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean, and I am not going to start now." But the voice of God spoke to him again. God said, "Don't, don't, don't call something unclean if I have made it clean." "If I say it's okay now, it's okay." It says, the same vision was repeated three times. God says, "Peter, listen: Do not call something unclean if I have made it clean." "Peter, listen to me, "Do not call something unclean if I have made it clean." Peter, don't argue with me, "If I say it's okay, it's okay." Then the sheet was suddenly pulled back up to heaven.

Because ... it's not about food, it's about people. This is about Gentiles. This is about the kind of people God loves, but we push away. And Peter

got it. And so in the very next scene he goes to the house of Cornelius, the Gentile, and he shares the truth and grace of Jesus, and God pours out his Holy Spirit, and they fill up the baptistry.

Let me tell you what's going on. Here's the deal: Disgust builds walls, walls God does not honor. And our disgust walls prevent us from doing our job. Our walls prevent us from reaching people God loves with God's truth and God's grace. And even when we try to share God's truth and grace with those who disgust us, our walls prevent them from hearing us. Why would a Jap listen to words of God's grace and God's truth from a man in whose eyes he sees hate? Why would a black listen to me tell him how precious he is to God if all he sees in my eyes is disgust? You see, our walls cause us to lean away. And our walls cause them to lean away, even if we try to shout God's truth and grace from behind them...

So God tears down our walls. He says to us, "Don't you dare call someone unclean that my Son has gone to the cross for." If God says they are okay, don't argue with him. And once they got the point, God used these early Christians to explode his grace and truth into a world they used to despise. And once we get the point, God will use us to explode his grace and truth into a world we are prone to despise.

You see ... loving God means learning to love who God loves. And it is love that carries us past the boundaries of disgust. You've seen it: love always involves the suspension of disgust. Love is a place where disgust rules are discarded. You know it's true ...

This guy went with his church on a mission trip to Africa not knowing what to expect. He knew it would hot and dusty; he hoped he would see some exotic animals; he planned to bring back pictures of people he met there. The team was taken out into the jungle where there was a small medical clinic. He was assigned to help a nurse who worked there. A man came in with a bandaged foot. The bandage was filthy, the wound stunk. As the nurse began to unwrap the foot, the stench grew worse — gangrene had set in. As he watched, it was all he could do to keep from throwing up. And as the nurse cleaned the wound, he muttered, "I wouldn't touch that for \$10,000." She stopped; she looked him in the eye, and she said, "I wouldn't either." Because love is a place where disgust rules are discarded.

My daughter-in-law walked in on Jax, my grandson, a couple weeks ago. Jax is 18 months old, a pretty disgusting age. He had managed to strip himself. He was standing up in his crib, letting it fly, and smearing his accomplishments all over his chest. Pretty much the definition of disgusting. But love is a place where disgust rules are discarded, and so Monica goes in, and she cleans up the mess, made by her precious little boy.

It's amazing how we just naturally suspend the rules of disgust when we love someone. So a wife hangs with a husband when he fails miserably, because she loves him. And a husband hangs with a wife when she misbehaves, because he loves her. And a parent doesn't quit on a prodigal, or on a kid who moves in with a gay lover, or who struggles with an addiction to porn, or who chooses the wrong friends – because we love them. Because love – love -- is a place where disgust rules are discarded.

And God says, "I've called you take my truth and my grace to people I love. So don't you dare build walls and lean away from my kids." He says, "I've put my Spirit inside you to help you love what I love. He says, "I've torn down your walls; now, show them my grace, and my truth."

I'll have a few more words for you after the Lord's Supper. But let me wrap this part up with two big ideas. #1: Holiness is not about building walls, holiness is about tearing them down. We think holiness is about separation. We think purity is about building boundaries, impregnable walls. Jesus says holiness is about tearing down the boundaries that cause us to lean away, and that cause them to push us away. Jesus says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice. I want you to captivate them with my grace, rather than destroy them with your judgments." Let's be holy!

And #2: This is so cool. We think that if we touch a man who is unclean, we'll get dirty, we will be polluted. Jesus says, "Uh uh." Because a touch of grace is infinitely more powerful than the pollution of sin." You see, Jesus leaned in, because it was the only way to cleanse the unclean. And that's our job too. Don't be afraid of getting messy. His grace is way more powerful than their sin. Do you believe that?

In a moment we are going to share the Lord's Supper together. This is a place where God proves that where love is disgust rules are discarded. And if you are a Jesus follower you are welcome here...

We are going to sing the words of maybe my favorite hymn. The words are my words: "O to grace how great a debtor, Daily I'm constrained to be. Let Thy grace now, like a fetter, Bind my wandering heart to Thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it (Don't you?), Prone to leave the God I love; So Here's my heart, O take and seal it, Seal it for Thy courts above."

So, as the nurse carefully cleaned the wound, he muttered, "I wouldn't touch that for \$10,000." She stopped; looked him in the eye, and said, "I wouldn't either." Ever been there, ever felt that?

There is a story told about St. Francis of Assisi. He was riding his horse on an open plain when he came upon a leper. He was horrified, he was inclined to lean away. But he remembered his resolve to be the man God wanted him to be, and he knew he had to conquer himself if he was to be a man of God. So he got off his horse and he went to kiss the man – to kiss a leper. And he did. And when he got back up on his horse and turned back towards the man – the guy was gone, the open plain was just empty. And filled with wonder and with joy at this encounter with God, he resolved always to lean in. And if you know anything about Francis, you know he did.

Pam Carmichael is a woman at Randy's church. She was on a trip to Indianapolis when she stopped at a Thornton's to use the restroom. As she was leaving the restroom she met an elderly woman struggling with a walker to get through the door. So Pam helped her into the restroom, and then into the stall. And then she pulled down the old woman's pants and sat her on the stool; then she waited, and she cleaned her up, and she dressed her. And she helped her wash her hands and helped her out the door. Why would she do that? And the woman, and her old and fragile husband were so grateful. Because love is a place where disgust rules are discarded.

What carries a person past the boundaries of disgust? And who are the people in your world that you are inclined to lean away from, for whom God wants to tear down some of your walls?

We had an opportunity to lean in to the messy a couple weeks ago here at Capital City. Quite a few of our people went to a trailer park where some of the people are very poor, because we wanted to make a difference. Some of the things we did were pretty messy. We touched some things we wouldn't ordinarily touch. We served some people – precious people – we wouldn't ordinarily serve. I've asked Sean Larkin to answer a few questions about his experience there.

What did you do?

Why did you go?

How did they respond?

Do you think you made a difference?

Was it worth it?

In a few words ... what was the experience of Zach?

You see, in a thousand different ways God is going to give you the opportunity to lean in to the messy. At work, at school, in your neighborhood, with your family, with your friends. Remember: God says, "Don't call unclean those I have cleansed." And remember: "Love ... love is the place where disgust rules are discarded." When we get it – when we really get it – we're going to honor God by filling this thing (baptistery) up! Will you help?