

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

If you have visited a hospital recently no doubt you have noticed all the hand sanitizing stations around. When I go to Union Hospital for example, I must sanitize my hands before entering a patient's room and after I leave.

I think we all know why there is such emphasis on this level of hygiene. MRSA, for example, is such a powerful infection that going to such great lengths to combat it is worth the trouble.

The people of Jesus' day had an even more pervasive sense of the importance of cleanliness than we do. Perhaps this was due to the fact that they had much more limited means for combating it and so had to be very intentional about making use of the means they did have at their disposal.

A primary means was the practice of keeping one's distance from anything that was "unclean." This applied to things like blood, or the dead, but was also carried over to things in the spiritual realm.

We don't really know what the "unclean spirit" was that confronted Jesus in the synagogue, but it is safe to assume that the presence of such a reality made everyone nervous and even threatened to make them "unclean" by coming into such close proximity with it.

I think the unclean spirit's conversation with Jesus has to be seen as a sort of taunting. The spirit is basically threatening to make Jesus unclean if he dares do anything about the fact that it had taken possession of the man. The unclean spirit is playing off the common assumption that unclean things can infect the clean, but that the opposite was not true.

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All the other people in the room were operating from that assumption, with the result that the unclean spirit had total control of the man, and no one was going to do anything to alleviate the man's suffering.

Jesus' authority is such that he can counteract the normal way that the contact between clean and unclean unfolds. His "cleanliness" is not threatened by the unclean spirit because his holiness, his cleanliness is foundational to who he is.

He is not about to let the unclean spirit have its way, but acts with sovereign authority to free the man from it. Salvation through Jesus comes to all, no exception.

I think this interplay between clean and unclean is a persistent issue worthy of our consideration. When it comes to question regarding hygiene and avoidance of disease we are well advised to follow what science has discovered about how diseases are transmitted.

The problem really lies in the spiritual realm. For one, we may have trouble believing that Jesus has the necessary authority to really free us from the "unclean ways" we live our lives.

"Am I really forgiven?" is a question a lot of people struggle with, for example. "Is it really worth hoping in God and his promise of salvation"? is another.

Beyond that, we can also let questions of clean and unclean dictate our interactions with those around us. There was an article in the paper on Thursday about the "Point in Time" initiative to count the homeless in our community.

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A few of the homeless were interviewed in the course of the outreach and one of the conclusions the reporter drew was that the homeless, as a rule, try to stay out of the way of other people. They don't want to have to deal with being shunned, or the experience of being avoided, so they keep to themselves.

One man acknowledged that the "point in time" people were the first ones in a long time who had actually come up to him and engaged him in conversation. Most of the time people just avoid eye contact and try to get away from him as fast as they can.

Fear can do that to us. It can convince us that we run the risk of catching something if we engage a person whose life is lacking the basic necessities we take for granted.

And its not limited to the homeless. It could be the same sort of dynamic playing out if we encounter someone with mental health issues, or someone who is simply socially awkward or whose level of hygiene is not where ours is.

Is any of that really necessary for a person who believes in the authority of Jesus and his commitment to save all of us from whatever it is that holds us bound or keeps us from the fullness of life God intends for us?

In the synagogue Jesus was having nothing of the common assumption that our only option was to keep our distance. He did not fear to engage the unclean spirit and free the man from its destructive influence.

Can we be more discerning and less quick to draw the

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conclusion that we can do nothing but stay away? There are plenty of stories around about the blessings, the unexpected blessings, that have come from following Jesus' lead and engaging those we had previously avoided. Those blessings are a part of our salvation as well as theirs.