

UNTOUCHABLES
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
January 25, 2015

OPENING WORDS ~ *Gordon B. McKeeman*

We summon ourselves from the demands and delights of the daily round
From the dirty dishes and unwaxed floors,
From unmowed grass and untrimmed bushes,
From all incompleteness and not-yet-startednesses,
From the unholy and the unresolved.

We summon ourselves to attend to our vision
Of peace and justice,
Of cleanliness and health,
Of delight and devotion,
Of the lovely and the holy,
Of who we are and what we can do.

We summon the power of tradition and the exhilaration of newness,
The wisdom of the ages and the knowing of the very young.

We summon beauty, eloquence, poetry, music to be the bearers of our dreams.

We would open our eyes,

Our ears,

Our minds,

Our hearts,

To the amplest dimensions of life.

We rejoice in manifold promises and possibilities.

Come, let's spend this sacred time together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Inside the Slidy Diner* ~ *Laurel Snyder*

In this gross and creepy story, we spend time inside an 'unsavory' diner, but learn that it also has some pleasant surprises.

READING *To Fall in Love with Anyone, Do This* ~ *Mandy Len Catron*

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/fashion/modern-love-to-fall-in-love-with-anyone-do-this.html?_r=0

MESSAGE

Here's a story. A few days ago, in between appointments, I had a sudden impulse. There wasn't slush on the roads, and it was below freezing. Maybe, just maybe, if I hurried, I could get my filthy car washed!

There was only one car ahead of me, already in the wash, and that felt almost as if I'd be elected to be clean. It was wonderful! The spray of water...the enveloping soapy foam...feeling the filth slide off. Afterward, driving down the road, I felt so so so very clean just being inside a sparkling car. It made me happy. But, I noticed that many cars around me were very dirty, and began to wonder if they were noticing how CLEAN I was. Should I keep my distance just in case they would spray any of their muck onto me? I was clean, I was proud, and I was a

little bit paranoid. Unwashed cars, and their drivers became suspect. I began to dream about living in a place where every car was required to be kept clean, and the roads were obsessively swept...how, even if I had to live in a place where there was this much diversity of vehicle cleanliness, I'd at least like to have designated places where clean cars could park and drive together, away from the dirty crowd...

Holy car wash Batman! I didn't really feel that way...at least not ALL of that. But do you see how this could happen?

Here's another story. We often show a video in our "New UU" class...a video that takes a quick romp through Unitarian Universalist history. I get a perverse giggle when it tells the story of John Calvin and Michael Servetus (a heretic we claim as our own.) Calvin challenged Servetus, who is under attack and in hiding for his publication called "The Errors of the Trinity," to a debate. Servetus, for some unfathomable reason, returned to Geneva to take him up on it, and was arrested.

Then, as perhaps now, at least in some quarters, there was a perceived need to keep Christianity, however reformed, clean....to purge it of "such filth, such deadly pestilence" as Servetus was propagating. Servetus' sentence included the accusation, "you have obstinately tried to infect the world with your stinking heretical poison...." Thus, "desiring to purge the church of God of such infection and cut off the rotten members..." we condemn you, Michael Servetus, "to be attached to a stake and burned with your book to ashes."¹

Religion...and not just religion, all of culture, really...creates all kinds of connections and rules about, and between, what is sacred and vile, perfect and imperfect, clean and unclean, pure and impure, holy and unholy. Without over-generalizing, there are quite compelling arguments to be made for the way we, often subconsciously, link what is dirty with what is unholy, what is smelly with what is untouchable, and what is disgusting, to us, with what is morally depraved.

It begins early. We learn what is touchable and what is not..."Oh my god, don't touch that! Get that out of your mouth! That's icky, don't touch! Eeeyouuu...that's disgusting! Daddy, that's gross!" Much of what we're taught, to be sure, is concerned with health, and safety and basic sanitation, but even that is governed by our western standards and commercial marketing. Yet some of it is simply learned behaviour, with little basis in science or necessary protection. We learn what we should allow to 'touch' us, and what we should push away or exclude. We learn what is to be kept apart, sacred, from anything that might corrupt it, be that germs, or ideas, or certain people.

Of course, along with what is nurtured in us, we have to give some credit to nature. I have a nephew who from an early age exhibited a near phobia about stickiness or disorder of any kind. What couldn't be organized and clean, he wanted no part of (he's nearly 30 now, and has grown out of this...though he still has a lovely, sensitive nature.) His younger sister, on the other hand, was/is fearless about mucking into swamp waters, or catching bats, or playing with snakes. They were quite a pair as little tykes...testing and challenging one another to do something they didn't want to do. Mostly however, they acted, as brother and sister, in a kind

¹ Bainton, Roland H., *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus 1511-1553* (Blackstone Editions: Providence, RI: 1953,2005) 141.

of mutually supportive dance...what one could not stomach or tolerate, was done by the other. He doesn't see her ability to get dirty as gross; she doesn't judge his need for order and cleanliness as anal.

You see, across cultures, and even within one family, there are few universals. We might learn that eating or touching mould is yucky...yet certain fungi are considered culinary delicacies. We might recoil from whatever is slimy and smelly...either to touch or to be...never allowing ourselves to go to places like the Slidy Diner, while for others, such association and interaction is part of everyday life. Some of us would throw out anything in the refrigerator that's past its expiration date; others completely ignore those dates.

We've been talking this month about 'the holy.' If in this process you've come to a new or more nuanced understandings of what might be holy for you, let me suggest that those understandings should might offer you a clue about what it is that you consider to be unholy.

For example, several weeks ago, I said that for me, the holy not something I can define, but rather is something I can know because of how it feels to be in its presence. In the presence of the holy, I feel an acute sense of being alive and connected...like there's electricity running through my body and vibrating with all that surrounds me. In the presence of the holy, I feel whole and loved. It is a place where the boundaries dissolve between what is and what can be. In the presence of the holy, I am immersed in awe.

From that, it follows, that what is unholy for me has a deadening effect, and causes disconnect. The unholy makes me feel broken and unwhole. In that place, the wall between where I am and where you are is solid and impenetrable. I feel fear. I feel disgust...not for what is outside of me...not really...but rather for myself, and for how I feel. It's yucky.

Then, last week, Meredith Hill offered us a window into her take on the holy. She said, (quote)The numinous has an alluring quality --- (it is) that which draws us to it with an almost irresistible force towards a mystical [] union with the divine. ...The recognition of the presence of the numinous means the cleansing recognition of the holiness within our own soul. Within that moment of union, numinous soul enveloped in numinous other, is a further movement towards ... where human will and the will of God converge and the soul answers "yes". (unquote)

So, I'd interpret this to say that, for her, the unholy would be that which pushes us away from that union with the divine, away from recognizing the divine in ourselves. The unholy would incite us to say 'no'...and to turn away from any recognition of oneness. (I'm only assuming. Meredith gets to say what it is that is unholy for her.)

Looking at what is holy, and then what is unholy, you might wonder what difference it makes if we have, or haven't, dusted the furniture...what difference it makes if you toss out a can of chili because it's past its expiration date...and, of course, it doesn't matter. (Although if you saw "Just Eat It" at ReFrame last night, you might question the authority of expiration dates.) Still, in and of themselves these are choices which are simply a matter of personal preference. But what does matter, is that we unearth and examine any attitude or mores that we attach to that dusting or tossing...attitudes which might contribute to our disconnect from what is holy. Do you feel dirty, somehow inferior, because you haven't dusted? Do you turn up your nose at people who shop at 'railroad salvage' where expired, but edible, food is inexpensive?

What does it say about us that billions of dollars are invested in the advertising and packaging of cleaning products? We seem to be obsessed with cleanliness. Is it not simply a matter of diversity that some don't see dust and dirt, and some would rather spend their time on other things, while others are house-cleaning fanatics? Yet this cleanliness thing can be used as a way to feel 'holier than thou', and leads to dirt and unworthiness somehow going hand in hand.

Who knew, really, but it seems that lots of books have been written about dirt and cleanliness. Anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote "Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo," published in 1966. In it, she says that while we eliminate dirt as a positive effort to organize, it is not difficult to see how it is that what we believe about dirt and contagion can be used to define status and to build hierarchies of worth.

Martha Nussbaum, in her book, "Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law" apparently makes the point that feelings of disgust and shame are associated in troubling ways with a desire to hide from our own humanity, with a pathological wish to be invulnerable, and lead us to create categories of people who are seen (and who come to see themselves) as flawed and defective. This is the danger of cleanliness codes.² Imperfect fruit, bruised vegetables, and classes of people are set aside as unholy, as embodiments of all the things that we can't accept in ourselves.

Look at the history of 'untouchables' in India...an entire group of people consigned to the lowest position in society, working in gutters and sewers and toilets (and don't think that similar things aren't happening here in our community today...with the poor, with the mentally ill, with the homeless, with our First Nations...)

Our propensity to condemn that which we believe to be unholy, is repeated over and over throughout history. We lift up and set aside what is holy and right, wanting to keep it pure and 'untouched'... undefiled. Then, hoping to align ourselves with that holiness, we choose not to touch, or be defiled, by what we deem to be untouchable, even when those things are within ourselves.

In many ways, this is an indication of what it is to be human. Humans create categories that organize things. We seem to need to define what is *us* and what is *not us*. We want to improve ourselves and do what is right...or, sometimes, in the alternative, especially when we want to upset the status quo, to know what is deliciously wrong and 'not allowed in respectable company.' But, whether setting rules or breaking them, we see everything through the limited lens of our own experience, and make determinations and judgments with incomplete perspective.

Are there things that rightfully deserve our judgment or disdain? Yes, surely there are. What I'm suggesting today, what I'm asking today, is that we open our eyes just a tiny bit wider and at least ask 'why' when we arrive at the boundary between clean and unclean, at the intersection of holy and unholy. Do we make that distinction for good reason, and if so, what is that reason? Do we recoil with justifiable fear or disgust, or have we been conditioned to see

² <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/7697.html>

anything, maybe everything, that is outside of our comfort zone as revolting or disdainful? What would happen if we relaxed our borders...even just a little bit?

I have never been good with dead things. Dead mice, dead squirrels, dead birds... we've all encountered them in our houses and gardens...and when I need to bury or dispose of one, I have to muster all my courage. I say to myself..."Julie, it's dead. It can't hurt you." Then, I use the longest possible implement, so that I can stay as far away as possible. It's irrational, I know, but still I feel an automatic queasiness. There is a bit of self-talk that helps... "Julie, this was a creature that is part of the beautiful web of all that is," and while that does reduce my queasy feeling, I still am not comfortable putting my hand to dead feather or fur.

Yet the same has not been true with the dogs of my life. I held each of them as they were dying, and hugged each close for an extended time after she died, and carried each one gently to her final resting place. Why don't I feel the same ability to hold a dead robin, or mouse?

Perhaps it was the relationship. Perhaps it was because I had loved, had chosen to love Jenny, and Betty Ann, and Tillie. I had looked into their dog eyes and they had gotten under my skin, become part of me, and I part of them. I knew that they saw and loved me, just as I loved them.

Still, my personal connection with Tillie did not make her a more important furry being than your dog, or cat, or the racoon that trolls my backyard at night. A \$10 car wash and 15 minutes did not make me into a better, more brilliant, more worthy person.

May we never be afraid to stand up for what we believe is right and good. But may we use the categories of holy and unholy carefully. Let's not be fooled into thinking that our way of living is the only right and pure way. Let's not think for a moment only we have the true and holy religion. Let's not be lulled into feeling superior to anyone else because we cannot understand their cultural practice or ritual. Instead, may we take the time, and make a sincere effort, to make holy connections across difference. You never know, maybe we'll even fall in love. May it be so.

CLOSING WORDS

~ Hasidic tale

An old Rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun.

"Could it be," asked one of the students, "when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?"

"No," answered the Rabbi.

Another asked, "Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?"

"No," answered the Rabbi.

"Then what is it?" the pupils demanded.

"It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that it is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night."

May you go out into the world, with fresh sight, prepared to share more love. Amen.