

Message Notes July 26th, 2020

Beautiful Outlaw: Encountering the True Personality of Jesus

Week 7: Scandalous Freedom of Jesus (Matt. 8:1-4; John 4:4-9)

- **Touching the Untouchable**

- ***The Holy One touches the unclean.*** Again and again, he reaches out to those who are “dirty,” unwelcome, unwanted, unsafe, untouchable. This is, apparently, what holiness does. This is what love looks like. And whether the people around him understood it or not, he was utterly free—scandalously free—from their legalistic judgment. He had no concern for “keeping up appearances,” and no fear about tarnishing his reputation: his only concern was truth, righteousness, and love—true holiness. Jesus demonstrates a *scandalous freedom* in a culture of religious legalism and strict social rules. Today, we’re going to learn about why that is.
- We come up against plenty of legalism and false religion today. It’s not hard to find in our culture and it’s not hard to get caught up in. In my first year of pastoral ministry, I had the opportunity to speak at a baccalaureate service for high school graduates. I was 22, pretty fresh out of college, and mostly focused on youth ministry at the time. I wasn’t thinking too much about what was expected at this occasion, I was more focused on trying to reach teens with a message from God—and not screw up.
 - The day came, and all in all it went pretty well: it was in the auditorium of the school and many students and families came to participate in this pre-graduation tradition. During the message, I stepped out from behind the podium and stood on the edge of the stage, I tried to look the students in the eyes and connect with their hearts. At one point, when I was talking about having courage and taking leaps of faith, I even sat down on the edge of the stage and hopped off (...I was pretty out of control). I was nervous, but afterwards the feedback was good—one grandfather came up to me and said it was the best baccalaureate message he had ever heard, because it really connected with the students. But something came to my attention later. I made one big mistake and some people weren’t happy: *I didn’t dress right*. I didn’t wear a suit; I wore a dress shirt and tie on top—but on the bottom I wore *jeans*. Oops! They were nice jeans—they weren’t holy or anything—I thought it looked sharp. But some folks thought that I dishonored the occasion. Apparently, they didn’t really care about what I had to say—they just wanted me to look the part. I did learn some lessons from that and took it in stride: sometimes it’s better to just follow the social expectations so people are willing to listen.
 - That’s a really, really small example, but it illustrates the point that we church folk can mix up priorities pretty easily. We can major on the minors and minor on the majors just like the religious leaders in Jesus’ day.
- I don’t want to cause offense to you, but if something like wearing jeans to church really sets you off, you would have been *furious* with Jesus. He broke a lot of “rules,” some pretty big ones. He didn’t break God’s Law; on the contrary, he fulfilled it. But he broke a lot of manmade rules.
- Take this first example in Matthew 8: Jesus has just finished preaching arguably the most important sermon of all time, certainly one of his most important moments in ministry—“The Sermon on the Mount.” The crowds had been growing, his reputation was expanding, talk was spreading. People were *watching closely*. He was already walking on thin ice: his whole sermon was revolutionary. He challenged the prevailing wisdom of the day, because he was shifting the center of morality from external observances of the law to the inward condition of the *heart*—a far more demanding kind of holiness. The last thing he needed was to get some bad publicity that would tarnish his growing reputation—at least, that’s how we would think of it. But watch what he does right after preaching this sermon.
 - “*When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him,*” (lots of people are still watching him in this moment). “*A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy.*” (Matt. 8:1-3)

- This can just seem like a nice Bible story demonstrating Jesus' compassionate spirit, unless we pay attention to what's really going on here.
- We need to stop a moment and recognize what a horrible plight leprosy was. In this culture, it was not only a matter of sickness that brought about great physical suffering; it came with the loss of everything you valued and the label of spiritual uncleanness that led to ostracism. To protect others, you had to leave your family, your home, and your village to dwell in a designated place outside the community. You would never be able to hug your loved ones again. On top of that, a host of rules from the Law of Moses were imposed on you as a safety to the rest of the community.
- Lepers had to walk far away from others and cry out "unclean" as they passed by; they had to wear tattered clothes and unkempt hair, and cover their face to signal to everyone that they were unclean and infected. They lived alone. They were *never* touched.
- So, here comes Jesus, a towering religious figure who has just taken authority to re-frame what faithfulness to the Law of Moses looks like—in a way, he's acting like a new Moses. Imagine the disgust and terror of people as the leper approached this holy man. What faith it would take to risk like this and ask, "Lord, if you are willing, *you can make me clean.*"
- To me, what Jesus does next is one of the most beautiful scenes in Scripture: before Jesus says anything, "*He reached out his hand and touched the man.*" (v. 3). Jesus had to get close enough to this filthy, diseased person, to *touch* him. I can assure you, everyone else is keeping *a lot more than six feet* away from him! But Jesus walks over, with everyone watching, and touches the unclean. Then he says these beautiful words, "I am willing...Be clean!"
- Jesus didn't *have* to touch this guy to heal him: there are plenty of time where he heals people without touching them, there's even a story of where he heals someone from a county away! But he chooses to touch this man who probably hasn't been touched in years.
- John Eldredge writes, "*Marks version of the story says that Jesus was 'moved with compassion, (1:41 NASB). He who can be so immovable is actually moved rather easily, moved for all the right reasons. Because this is the one thing the man needs. No one has touched him for a very long time. To be starved for human touch is far worse than to starve for bread. The kindness of Jesus in this one act is enough to make me fall in love with him. But so is his scandalous freedom. Because now, Jesus is defiled. At least, in the eyes of all the proper authorities he is.*" (*Beautiful Outlaw*, John Eldredge, © 2022 FaithWords Publishing)
- Based on the Law of Moses, touching someone or something that was unclean meant that you became unclean. And here goes Jesus, in front of everyone he had just preached to, "defiling" himself by touching an untouchable person. It's like he is dragging his own name through the mud, just so he can heal and restore a suffering man who approached him in faith. This is amazing. This is freedom. And it's far from the only time Jesus does something like this.
- **Talking to the Outcast**
- In John 4, we have the famous story of the woman at the well. This is a great passage that we're going to work through in these next couple weeks. Watch what Jesus does in this episode:
 - "...he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's Well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?' (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food)."—in other words, he was all alone—"The Samaritan woman said to him, 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)" (John 4:3-9)
 - Let's stop right there for today. Once again, it's hard for us to grasp the scandal of this encounter, but consider three things:
 - *First*, she is a Samaritan, Jesus is a Jew. The text lets us know in case we're not familiar, *Jews do not associate with Samaritans*. And Jesus is not just any Jew—he's supposed to be the *Messiah!* Samaritans were despised by Jews with a fiery, hateful racism. Without getting into

the history of it, the Jews considered the Samaritans to be perverters of the true faith, heretics and half-breeds. If lepers were the physically untouchable, Samaritans were the cultural “untouchables.” Think of the greatest modern equivalents of racial or cultural discord, and that’s what this was like: Irish Catholic versus Protestant, South African Apartheid “Far Right” versus “Far Left,” White Supremacist versus Black Panther—that kind of tension.

- Second, she is a woman, Jesus is a man. And they are alone. It was not culturally appropriate or polite for an unmarried or unrelated man and woman to engage in interpersonal conversation like this. People would ask questions and make rumors about that sort of thing.
- Third, if you keep reading, you find out this isn’t just any woman, it’s someone who, shall we say, had a “reputation” in the community. She had been with five husbands and wasn’t married to the man she was living with at the moment. To put it bluntly, she was “sexually loose” in a time when that sort of thing could literally get a woman stoned.
- Add *all of that up*, then watch Jesus as he sits there alone at the well, in the heat of the noonday sun, *and asks this woman for a drink*. Now you understand why she says, “How can you ask me for a drink?” She seems like the type of person who wouldn’t be shocked by a lot of things—she’s had more than a few men offer to buy her a drink—but she is genuinely shocked by Jesus. And in this moment, as we’ll see in this story in the next few weeks, Jesus chooses to skillfully engage her heart for the sake of redemption. And he succeeds.
- This is another *scandalous* encounter. It’s the social equivalent of oil and water—or potentially, a match and gasoline.
- Think about the freedom of Jesus in these moments to bypass proper expectations and overlook stark social differences, to break the manmade rules regardless of who is watching—for the sake of his redeeming work. When I take an honest look within, I realize that I am still *very* aware and often controlled by what people think. I am hesitant to do things if I’m concerned what others will think. As much as I want to love everyone and be like Jesus, there are certain kinds of people and situations where, even without thinking about it, I become a little stiff and uncomfortable—I don’t know had to engage, I don’t want to be too close. I carry my own pet biases and prejudices and legalisms even if I don’t want to admit it. It’s sad, but it’s true. Can you relate?
- Jesus has a freedom that allows him to focus solely on what is good and true. He doesn’t see labels, he sees *people to be loved*. He doesn’t focus on the rules, he focuses on *redemption*.
- **What Real Holiness Is**
- To understand why this is, why Jesus has such freedom, we actually need to understand what *real holiness* is.
- The traditional understanding of the Law led people to see life in terms of clean and unclean. Uncleaness could be transmitted, and if you were clean you had to take measures to avoid being defiled: avoid eating certain kinds of things, avoid certain activities, avoid contact with certain kinds of people.
- But there were whispers in the Old Testament of a deeper understanding of holiness, and Jesus made it loud and clear: rather than be concerned about the uncleaness of someone else affecting himself, Jesus’ demonstrated that holiness could be transmitted to the unholy. Jesus’ holiness could transform the unholy, without himself becoming any less pure. This is a game changer—holiness has the capacity to transform.
- I heard a person describe it this way: some people think of living a holy life as walking around wearing a pair of brand-new, bright white skinny jeans (or if you’re of this generation, the Jon Travolta Disco Leisure Suit). You’ve got to protect yourself in that outfit! You can’t be around certain situations, you don’t want to eat certain foods, you don’t want to be hugging certain people—or that outfit is going to be in trouble. So your behavior becomes about protecting yourself, keeping yourself clean in a dirty world.
- But, looking at the life of Jesus, you can also view holiness *as the bleaching agent*. If you’re walking around with that bottle of bleach, that tide stain stick, that bucket of Oxyclean, it doesn’t matter what kind of mess you come around, you’ve just got to spread it out and share the wealth

and everything is going to be clean. The dirtier the scene, the more you'll see the power of that bleaching agent.

- Christian holiness is like that: it's not about protecting yourself from the dirtiness of the world, it's about unleashing this transformation on everything that comes in contact with you. It turns the whole thing *upside down* and it's a totally different way of engaging the world and culture than many of us have been taught. But it is the way of Jesus.
- Do you want that kind of freedom? I'll be honest, I don't always do well with this, because I've become accustomed to a certain culture and a certain sphere of life working in the bubble of the church world. But I want that freedom. And the only way to get that freedom from Jesus is to spend time *with* Jesus. Walk with him, talk with him, talk about him, read about him, follow him as your teacher. If you are his disciple, then you are his apprentice: let him show you how to live with the utter freedom and relief of *his* holiness in your life. What a glorious freedom that is!
- On the other hand, if you have felt like one of those outcasts, if you feel like you're around a bunch of people wearing white skinny jeans when you go to church, and you're the one with the grass stains on your knees, recognize how Jesus approaches you: he wants to be your friend, he wants to connect with you and heal you even if you feel like everyone else is pushing you out. Even if you've thought countless times, "They would reject me if they knew *this*," Jesus invites you to come and be with him and be transformed in his presence.
- Jesus is amazing. So let's draw near to him, ask him to heal us, fill us, and make us holy like he is. Amen.