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SERMON

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Ew, Disgust

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Ew...Broccoli

Imagine with me for a moment.

You sit down at the dinner table. In front of you is a colorful plate of meat, fruit, vegetables, and cheese. Your server comes to your side and pours a cool glass of your favorite drink. You take in the surroundings, the smells, the plate. Suddenly, you get a strange feeling that something isn't right.

You cry out! You push the plate away and struggle to get out of your chair.

I forgot to mention, in this imagined scenario, you are a three-year-old. And hiding in plain sight on your plate is broccoli, which you find disgusting.

From an early age, disgust is a big feeling that can cause us to react with outrage, withdrawal, and offense.

But like all big feelings, it has a job to do, as well.

The Evolution of Disgust

Early humans relied on disgust to protect them to continue their lineage to us today. Disgust is what led our ancestors away from dangerous rotten fruit to safe sustenance.

In a similar way, disgust has guided us toward social safety. As creatures wired for community, we need others to survive and thrive. Disgust has helped humans for generations to understand the norms that keep us within the safety of others like us. When norms are broken or subverted, disgust jerks us away from the threat.

Disgust draws lines in the sand, making us aware of who is in, who is out, and the limits of our acceptance.

Jesus was well aware of the lines in the sand of his day. He was aware of who had a seat of honor at the table and was left outside to beg for scraps.

Let's turn to Luke's Gospel and join Jesus at the table of a Pharisee. First, please join me in prayer.

Prayer for Illumination

Living God,

Through your Word, develop in us inner wisdom,

That we might discern your small voice in the midst of our big feelings.

In drawing near to Christ, may we become more like him.
Amen.

Scripture

Luke 11:37-44

³⁷ While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him, so he went in and took his place at the table. ³⁸ The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not first wash before dinner. ³⁹ Then the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰ You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹ So give as alms those things that are within and then everything will be clean for you.

⁴²“But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. ⁴³Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honor in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. ⁴⁴Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves on which people unknowingly walk.”

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Tables in Luke's Gospel

Jesus always seems to be sitting down for a meal in the Gospel of Luke. Yet, he was not always a gracious guest. Some of his most controversial, even offensive, teachings were offered at the table. He was known to dine with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners, those who were unwelcome outsiders to the religious elite. Those who were ritually unclean. At the same time, he was also invited by the religious leaders to eat at their tables, to share his views, and to be assessed as a traveling teacher.

This was a normal practice at this time and in this culture. Traveling preachers would come into a town, and the Pharisees and scribes of that place would invite them for a meal. They would offer hospitality and get the chance to grill the new guy. Religion and politics were front and center, not topics to be politely avoided.

In our text today, we find Jesus at the table of a Pharisee. And that's the problem. Jesus came in and immediately sat down at the table. He did not stop to wash his hands.

Disgusting! We, as people in the 21st century, may think. Ew ... this Pharisee is not wrong for reacting as, "shocked and somewhat offended," as the Message translation puts it. That's gross.

But Jesus isn't making a statement on germs. Washing hands before a meal in a first century Jewish household was not about bacteria or viruses. It was about being ritually clean. In this case, cleanliness was equal to godliness.

Jesus first dined with the unclean. Now he sat at the table as the unclean.

And the Pharisees felt disgust. They were shocked, offended, and put in a position of sharing this table and this meal with an unclean itinerant preacher from Nazareth.

Writer and preacher Nadia Bolz Weber has said, “Every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it.” This is what the Pharisees experienced. Jesus was on the other side of their line in the sand.

Disgust in Inside Out 2

Jo mentioned last week that we did our homework before embarking on this Big Feelings series by both seeing Inside Out 2.

In the movie, Disgust is personified as a sassy, green fashionista. She is cool. She is self-conscious. And she is at the ready to protect Riley, the 13-year-old protagonist, from gross foods, stinky smells, and social oblivion. She is ready to help her navigate the complicated and ever-changing landscape of the middle school social scene.

Near the beginning of the movie, there is a poignant scene with Disgust. A younger Riley is in class, while another girl stands up front struggling with a presentation. There are giggles from other kids in the room. And suddenly, this poor girl drops all her things in front of the whole class. Riley looks around and sees almost everyone laughing as the girl upfront bends down to pick it all up. And in her brain, at the emotional control center, Disgust leaps up to take control. To help that girl, would ruin Riley’s chances of ever being popular. Disgust goes to press the button that would make Riley react to

distance herself, to conform to the room, to stay safe even at the expense of someone else. But the button won't work. Riley's sense of self: Her core belief that she is a good person and helps others locks Disgust out. Riley gets out of her seat, bends down beside the girl, and starts picking things up. Another girl does the same and the three become inseparable friends.

What Triggers Disgust in Us?

What triggers disgust in you?

In a time of intense polarization, we are a disgusted society. Depending on where you fall on a given spectrum of political or social views, almost every day there has been something to be disgusted about in the past month.

This at a time when we are treated to the best athletes on earth coming together to unite in the spirit of competition and sportsmanship; at a time when Snoop Dogg is wearing equestrian gear to talk about dressage with Martha Stewart. It has been remarkable how joy and unity have been competing with disgust and division. These have been vying for control of our societal emotional center.

It's worth noticing this and paying attention to what this big feeling can reveal to us. What triggers disgust in us can tell us who is welcome at our table and who is not. The drag queen, the immigrant, the conservative politician, the unhoused, the wall street banker—the religiously or culturally or politically or financially other to us—are they part of “us”?

Disgust draws lines in the sand. And sometimes those lines are there to protect us. But they also divide us: Who is in and who

is not; who is like me and who is not; who is fully an American or fully Christian or fully human and who is not. Disgust, when in control and left unchecked, can easily way to contempt and dehumanization. What was meant to keep us safe—as a community, society, human family—can instead brew a dangerous form of division.

We have been there before. Thinking about the Olympics—It was not so long ago a disgusting for a woman to run a marathon or to compete in any athletics. It was disgusting for a black person to share a swimming pool with a white person. It was disgusting for a Jewish athlete to train at club with Protestant athletes.

Disgust cannot be our north star for what is good, what is true, and what is faithful.

Jesus' Disgust

Jesus knows the disgust of the Pharisees toward the unclean. This is not the first time he has challenged who is at their table. He clocks their disgust, but quickly flips it upside down.

“Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.”

Think of pulling a coffee mug out of the dishwasher. Have you ever had this happen? It may look clean on the outside. But then you look inside before you pour in the coffee, and it is crusty with the ice cream you had the night before. Ew, disgusting. The appearance of being clean, respectable, righteous, godly can be deceiving. The right rituals are all well and good, but when judgment, greed, and injustice are caked

onto our inner character, water pouring over our hands doesn't do much to make us clean.

Now Jesus was not disgusted because the Pharisees were sinners. He had shared the table joyfully with sinners. He had shared the table with the greedy, the unjust, those with skeletons in their closets. He went to a party full of tax collectors! He dined with prostitutes and allowed sinful women to wash his feet. Jesus' table was open to sinners. There was no disgust, only grace and welcome.

But when the Pharisees separated their table from those sinners; when they defined themselves as clean, and those other people as unclean, unwelcome, objects of disgust; Jesus turned their own standards around on them. If they did not want to sit at the table of grace, choosing instead the seat of judgment, then they, too, would be judged.

Discernment of Disgust

In his judgment of the Pharisees, Jesus reveals a level playing field. No one—even the most respectable religious leaders—is righteous, not one, as Saint Paul writes. All are sinners invited to the table of grace. And all bear the image of God.

When we let our disgust of another person or group take over the controls, we limit our capacity to see the divine image in them. We limit our capacity to live out of the divine image in us.

This does not mean letting go of standards for justice and morality. Disgust has a purpose. It can protect us and the people we love from bad milk and bad actors. To be disgusted in the face of violence, of greed, of dehumanization, of things

we feel are a threat, is to be human and to be discerning. Even Jesus seemed to reach a point of disgust with the Pharisee's hypocrisy.

Disgust is a big feeling that requires discernment over reactivity.

So I want to end with a prayerful practice of discernment for disgust. A practice that helps us to pause—before we react, before we post, before we speak—to discern the Spirit's movement as distinct from Disgust's protective posture.

Here are three questions to consider when you feel that jolt of disgust:

Is my disgust bringing me to the table of grace or to the table of judgment?

Is my disgust erasing the image of God in another?

Does the sense of who I am as a follower of Christ override my disgust?

Let's do this prayer exercise together, inspired by the Ignatian exercise of Examen, which is discernment of feelings throughout our day.

First take a few deep breaths and be attentive to God's presence in silence.

With a sense of gratitude, ground yourself in the truth that you are a beloved child of God.

I am welcome at God's table. I bear the divine image.

With a sense of humility, ground yourself in the truth that you have also sinned.

I have not loved God with all my heart.

I have not loved my neighbors as myself.

Breathe in the grace that God freely gives to you. Breathe out the fear of judgment.

Now give attention to a moment in the past hours, days, weeks, when you have felt disgust toward someone else. Invite God into that feeling and that moment.

How might disgust have been protecting me or those I love?

Did I lose sight that this person or group is created in the image of God?

How did disgust want me to react?

Does the sense of who I am as a follower of Christ call me to act?

Ask God for guidance for the future. Next time you feel disgust toward someone or something, may God remind you that you sit at the table of grace.

Amen.



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