

Confronting the Wrong Kind of Cleanliness

March 2019

Last week as the white supremacist was murdering person after person in the New Zealand mosques, he was trying to rid his twisted life and culture of the unclean people he believed invaded his space. The devil had convinced him he was beginning a revolution that would go viral and cause white people everywhere to join his cause of returning racial purity to their respective lands. He considered himself and his followers to be dedicated soldiers and self-appointed guardians of their perceived and glorious culture, history and past. To them, Muslims living in the West was a terrible mistake of modern life, a new trend to be confronted and stopped immediately. According to their worldview, Muslims are "unclean" people, polluting and ruining their Western style of life. If Muslims are not driven from their lands, so their thinking goes, all hell will break loose in every corner of their society. Little did he know what hell had already entered into his own heart.

Most of us could never imagine allowing our quiet, hidden prejudices or judgmental attitudes to evolve into hatred, violence, and death; but it can happen if we are not careful. Jesus warned us to confess our sin of anger before allowing it to blossom into even greater tragedy. During the Sermon on the Mount, he told his disciples the following: "You have heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.' But, I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell." (Matthew 5:21-22)



Many would say that our Western culture today has allowed contentiousness, anger, and even hatred to become a way of life. Have people completely forgotten the Sermon on the Mount, or perhaps an increasing number of people have never heard it? Have we become so comfortable with fearing and condemning people different from ourselves that we have crossed a line and become friends with hostility in ways unbeknownst to us? Jesus implored his followers to examine their hearts daily and vigorously, lest they allow Satan to gain a foothold in their lives. Unfortunately, for the New Zealand white supremacist and so many others in the world today, social media has become a substitute and dominant reality, too often fueling a dangerous new way of life, allowing fear and anger to overwhelm and even rule them. Our need to return to the teachings of Jesus, rather than the teachings of the latest blogger or tweeter, has never been greater.

Jesus was constantly confronting people who were pursuing the wrong kind of cleanliness in their lives. He told the religious leaders of his day: "What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and

the dish, but inside you are filthy - full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too."□
(Matthew 23:25-26) Jesus demands that we have clean hearts, clean consciences, and pure thoughts. But he does not leave us all alone to pursue these goals. His very presence in our lives, his love, grace, and Holy Spirit enable us to approach these goals slowly, but surely, one confession at a time.

Jesus knows when we are fearful of people different from ourselves. He invites us to recognize these fears and confront the prejudice that is beginning to well up inside us, before it is too late. For this reason, he once challenged his disciples to walk straight through the region of Samaria, rather than skirt around it, when they were walking north from Jerusalem to Galilee. Most Jews at the time would do anything to avoid contact with "unclean" Samaritans; they would literally go out of their way to walk around them, or at least ignore them. On this particular journey during a hot afternoon, Jesus initiated a one-on-one conversation at a well with a Samaritan woman, a person considered especially "unclean" because of her second-class gender. Because of their conversation, the Samaritan woman believed Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God. In fact, she helped begin a movement that eventually brought thousands of Samaritans to faith in the Lord. Nevertheless, when the disciples found Jesus talking with her, "They were shocked to find him talking to a woman, but none had the nerve to ask, 'What do you want with her?' or 'Why are you talking to her?'" (John 4:27b) They could not believe that their Master and teacher was allowing himself to become defiled by talking to a Samaritan woman.

The morning after the New Zealand massacre, many of my Christian friends contacted me, asking how they could best show their love and solidarity with our Muslim friends here in the Chicagoland area. I am pleased to report that after 13 years of helping Christians and churches in the Chicago area develop redemptive, bridge-building relationships with their local Muslim communities, numerous and genuine friendships have resulted between followers of these two great religions. As a result, many prayer vigils were organized throughout the city, most of them held inside mosques. Muslim leaders expressed deep gratitude for their Christian friends who visited and loved them during the tragedy of this past week. Last Sunday afternoon, a busload of parishioners from my local Presbyterian Church in Northbrook, Ill., drove to Rolling Meadows to attend a prayer vigil with our Bosnian and Turkish Muslim friends. They know full well that those who call themselves white supremacists do not know, follow, or even care about the teachings of Jesus. We wept together for the victims of the massacre; outraged at the victory Satan had last week in Christchurch, New Zealand. We emerged more resolved than ever to deepen our love and understanding of one another. In our eyes, neither one of us considers the other to be "unclean." And, we want to spread that message, those teachings of Jesus, as far and wide as we can.



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Next time you drive by a mosque, stop your car instead of whizzing by, go inside and introduce yourself as a Christian neighbor wanting to know more about Islam and the new Muslims who have moved into your neighborhood. Even tell them you are wanting to be obedient to the teachings of Jesus in loving your neighbor as yourself. I guarantee you will be surprised by the love and hospitality that greets you in return. If you feel led, ask if you can meet with them on a regular basis, or at least during high holy celebrations or on special occasions. You will have nothing to lose and everything to gain. You might even prevent Satan from getting another foothold or having another victory.



There are few better times during the year than right now, during the Lenten season, to search and examine our hearts for whatever fear, prejudice or hatred might be lurking in our lives. Jesus will help us become cleaner, braver, and more open-minded to the world around us. May we continue to walk closely with him to the cross and resurrection awaiting us at Easter, to the new life he has promised us. And may we remember and live by the words the Apostle John taught us: "...Love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear....We love each other because he first loved us. (1st John 4:18a,19)