

Lent II Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins,

Bishop of Saskatchewan

For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness.

That Gospel reading troubles us. It runs contrary to the image of Jesus we have created, and shatters our homemade notions of him, even more than the cleansing of the temple. The WWJD, What Would Jesus Do, movement would have to struggle with this. While there is in that movement a godly desire to submit one's will to Jesus Christ, there is also the naïve assumption that what Jesus did is easily understood, and therefore what he would do is a simple matter of extrapolation. You find people in terrible error, doing things in God's house which are a distraction. What would Jesus do? Do you expect him to drive people out with a whip, throw their money on the floor and spill all their stuff? Someone comes to you desperately pleading for help. What would Jesus do? Ignore her completely, and finally when she lays herself in front of you, call her a dirty dog?

We all try to fashion Jesus out of our vain imaginations and

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the half-truths we so love, and then we come to a Gospel reading like this morning's. We are shocked by his reaction to and his words with this woman. But remember friends, Jesus does not send her away, that is his disciples' proposal. They don't really care about her, or for her. They only want to get rid of her. This is one of three occasions when the disciples try to keep people from Jesus. They reacted the same way when mothers brought their children to Jesus and when surrounded by the hungry five thousand. What a picture of the disciples, and of us, keeping people away from Jesus, asking him to get rid of them!

But this woman persists, despite Jesus' silence and the disciples' desire to get rid of her. She believes that somehow Jesus can and will reach across the division of Jew and Gentile, that he can transcend that ancient barrier and hostility, defy that border, and heal her daughter. Here is a Palestinian pleading with a Jew. She begins calling on him by a title which recognizes that she has no claim on him. He is the Son of David, and she is one of David's enemies. He ignores her. She throws herself in front of him, in an action which speaks both of humility and boldness, and he puts her off with words that seem

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so harsh to us, reminding her that she has no claim, no right at all to his help. She agrees, but still she believes that despite her lack of any case, any argument, his mercy will respond.

Jesus, remember, is in foreign territory, the one time recorded in the Gospel that he steps out of Israel. It is not his rebuff of the woman, calling her and her people either dirty dogs or puppies, which would have shocked the world 2000 years ago. It is his final answer to her and his praise of her: “O woman, great is your faith!” Remember our Lord’s similar words about the faith of the Gentile Centurion: “Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” This woman has an amazing character, and we may say of her as the angel said of Jacob, “you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Remember what Jacob said to the angel after a whole night of this mysterious spiritual wrestling: “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” That same robust and tenacious spirituality is here in this remarkable woman. She will not let Jesus go until he blesses her.

Now, what can this old story mean for you and me? In Matthew and Mark, this account comes immediately following

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the record of Jesus' dispute with the Pharisees and scribes, over ritual hand-washing and the relation of God's commandments and human traditions. It is not the food that goes into the body and passes through, but the things that come out of the heart, which make men and women unclean. Mark adds the note in his telling, "Thus he declared all foods clean."

That context is helpful, for we see that in this story we have an unclean woman, a gentile, who comes to beg mercy for her daughter - who likewise is unclean, by the possession of a demon. It is then a story about uncleanness and defilement, and especially of a kind which possesses us, takes over our heart and mind, controls and paralyzes us, and compromises our freedom. Whatever we make of the accounts of demon possession in the New Testament - and the devil and his demons figure prominently in our Lenten Propers - in part, it represents that moral slavery to which we succumb, when our hearts and minds and lives are turned to sin. Jesus speaks of demons which come out only by prayer, and the persistent and faithful prayer of this woman is the means whereby his delivering power is mediated to her daughter. We can only be delivered by his gracious

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power. We have no claim, no right, nothing to plead but his mercy.

But what can demon possession have to do with nice people like you and me? If Lent has brought you any good so far, I hope that it has brought you out to the wilderness to see the devil you must confront. When we are consumed by an ill temper, filled with hatred, catch ourself in a lie or are caught by others, choose the misery of a grudge over the joy of reconciliation, chose death over life, when we habitually bend the truth, and cannot stop old and obviously self-destructive bad habits, something other than good has come to possess our hearts and minds, our thoughts and desires. You and I are unclean, possessed of evil and without any claim on Jesus. But hold on friends, hold on to him and don't let him go. Kneel down right in front of him and say, "Lord, help me." And he will reach across every barrier, and through your faith, his grace will save you, deliver you, and cleanse you. We can be delivered and we can be cleansed.

Now the particular forms of possession which are before us today have to do with the lusts of the flesh, and even more

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particularly, with sexual sins. We live in a time and place which winks at sexual sins on the false pretense of Christian charity. I warn you, rather, that the Lord is the avenger of all who transgress in this matter of sexual purity and holiness. Someone once suggested that the State has no place in the bedrooms of the nation, and we have come now to presume, that neither does the Church have any business in the bedrooms of her faithful.

But the scriptures warn us, and I warn you, that the Lord is the avenger of all such in all these things. For we belong, first and foremost, to the Lord our Creator, and for us as Christians, to the Lord our Saviour. Our bodies are not our own. 1 Cor. 6.18-20 says, “Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” Just so, the next verse where we left off in 1st Thessalonians continues with the same argument, about the primary offense in sexual uncleanness being against the Lord, whose Spirit has been given to us. 1st Thessalonians 4.8 says,

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“Therefore whoever disregards this (the call to holiness and the demands of sexual purity), disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

Sexual sins are, then, first against the Lord, and secondly they are against ourselves. In our Epistle, St. Paul spoke as well of how we wrong one another in this matter. For we who are married have come to belong to one another in a permanent and exclusive way. And more whether in thought word or deed, our lust is an offense, an assault and an objectification of another person. Paul talks rather of chastity, and he means here not just faithfulness from adultery, but faithful, sacrificial love and sexual expression within marriage. Holiness, honour, chastity - these are to typify marriage relations.

Whether single, married, or widowed, we are all called not to uncleanness but to holiness. Now, whenever we speak of sexual sins, we all think of someone else. The discussion of sexual morality brings out either the worst self-righteousness or laxity in us. But today in this matter, our Lord Jesus would convict us all. He equates the lustful glance with adultery, and he calls us to selfless love and chastity within marriage. It was

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precisely in the context of this matter that Jesus said, “Let whoever is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone.” Drop it, drop that stone of self-righteousness. Let him convict you and hear him say, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more.”

Our daughters and our sons, we ourselves at times, and our whole society is severely possessed by this demon of lust. Let us come, then, to Jesus the Son of David and our Lord for healing. Let us admit that we have no claim on him, no right to his help and salvation. And don’t let him go.

Let this be our prayer, as we come and kneel before him today and wait for a crumb to fall: Lord, help me. To that kind of faith Jesus says, “Be it done for you as you desire.” And we, too, may be healed. In the name of Jesus. Amen.