

Dirtiness is Next to Godliness?

I consider myself to be pretty experimental with food. I'm not a fussy eater – and having traveled to visit my brother doing development work in Bangladesh, Nepal and various places in Africa, how could I not be? But, watching a recent food show in the UK recently, even I was left rather squeamish at the report on the latest food fad: 'Freeganism'. The Freegans being videoed for the piece foraged for their food in dumpsters out the back of restaurants and supermarkets. They appeared to eat well: just-out-of-date sushi, cakes, breads and pastries; my gut reflex was to label this 'disgusting'.

There is something very primordial about our reactions when it comes to food and dirt. Our bodies want to stay healthy; we naturally smell the milk before we pour it, flinch at the chicken that's a little too rare. But these boundaries we set for ourselves about what is clean and dirty are perhaps more relative than we might think, and, in particular, relative to place.

Imagine a *Coke* can in your fridge, covered in mud. It's filthy. But put the same *Coke* can into a freshly plowed field, and the dirt label reverses: it's the *Coke* can that's dirtying the clean field. The anthropologist Mary Douglas put it this way in her seminal work 'Purity and Danger': dirt is just 'matter out of place.' She goes on to show that the decisions we make about what is dirty and clean are decisions about what we are including or excluding from our society. Who's in, and who's out. We see a very clear example of this in the purity laws that make up whole Chapters of Leviticus. If this infant nation was going to work out who they were, they had to work out what the dirt boundaries were.

The Jews weren't the only ones, of course. All cultures have developed complex, often unspoken, laws about what is clean and acceptable, and what is dirty and disgusting. On my first trip to India this became abundantly clear: our driver would empty his nasal passages onto the floor each morning in a loud and lengthy ritual. When asked why he didn't use a handkerchief, he reacted with disgust. "You people keep your snot in your pockets – that's disgusting!"

Just as every culture has its dirt boundaries, so every culture has evolved folk tales about those who challenge them. Anthropologists have called these characters 'Tricksters'. A classic Alaskan Trickster tale is recounted by Lewis Hyde in his book 'Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art'. The god Petrel is very mean. He has hoarded all of the water in the world into a well, and guards it day and night. One day the Trickster Raven approaches. Failing to persuade Petrel to give him a drink, he waits until he is asleep and then wipes dog-mess on his buttocks. Raven wakes Petrel up, and laughs at him that he has soiled himself. Petrel is so ashamed he runs off, and Raven flies down into the well and scoops water into his beak. As he flies off, drops of water fall from his mouth, creating all the rivers and creeks in Alaska.

Hyde's thesis is that all Trickster stories function in the same way as this one: a detached and mean god is dirtied in some way – or at least appears to be. But the end result of the god's dirtying is an act of renewal: god is brought closer to us, and a gift from heaven comes. Hyde then explores the idea that the artist is the modern-day inheritor of this Trickster role. Artists should challenge our dirt boundaries, not to shock for shock's sake, but to shake up our bounded selves and bring us to a place of renewal.

Reflecting on these senses we can see Christ as functioning as just such a Trickster, as the Divine Artist. The strict laws that Leviticus set out were the very markers of Jewishness. In a time when the Jewish identity was heavily under threat from the occupation, it is no surprise that dirt boundaries solidified. The Pharisees knew that it was these that set them 'apart' – made them holy.

We might then expect Jesus, as the fulfillment of the Law, as the pure divine in human form, to follow these commandments more religiously than any other. What we actually find is that Jesus' relationship to dirt is rather surprising, and I believe we can see Jesus challenging these boundaries in three different ways.

Firstly, for example, in Matthew 8 he touches a leper. Not only that, he commands him 'be clean'.¹ It was perhaps a deep part of the man's healing to realize that a skin disease did not make him 'dirty'. There was no dirt boundary there. By stepping across it and touching him, Jesus eliminated it entirely.

He similarly spoke to a Samaritan woman: there was simply no boundary there for Jesus. Talking to a woman was not a dirty act for him. However, he does not declare her and her complicated relational history 'clean'. There was still a boundary here, but Jesus freely stepped over it to be in communion with the woman, in order to lead to her a place of cleansing. He did not shout from a far or throw advice like grenades. He sat alongside her, realizing that no matter what her own 'dirt' was, being in communion with her did not make him 'dirty'.

Finally, Jesus drives the 'robbers' out of the Temple in what has popularly become known as the 'cleansing' of the Temple. I believe it was quite the opposite. By getting rid of the corrupt money-changers and Temple marketeer, Jesus was actually clearing the way for the dirty to gain free access to the Temple. They could now approach the very place where they might find cleansing, a way that had been barred to them by sanctimonious and crooked religious authorities.

These episodes from the Gospels show us three ways in which Christ forces us to re-evaluate our dirt boundaries. First, he erases some of them. Certain things that we call dirty, he considers clean. Second, he shows us that even if something is itself 'dirty', contact with it does not make us dirty. Instead, it is up to us to get alongside them and be in relationship with them, to sit down and eat with them and receive their generosity. Finally, Jesus shows us that the mechanisms for finding cleansing need to be kept clear; that dirt should always be given free access to the temple.

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that it was Jesus' challenge to the Jewish dirt boundaries that led to his execution. His contact with dirt left him tarred with the label of drunkard and he was unpopular with many for fraternizing with tax collectors and prostitutes. The religious leaders simply couldn't stomach a man who stepped over dirt boundaries and claimed to come back with clean feet. More importantly, they rightly perceived his deconstruction of the mechanisms of forgiveness – of cleansing – as a threat to the very structure of their Temple-based power. If he could simply say 'you are forgiven', what was left for them to do? He called them 'whitewashed sepulchers'. He had to be expelled, spat out as filth.

It is, of course, in Christ's passion that we see his Trickster work most clearly. For what could be more dirty, more 'out of place', than God hung, cursed, on a tree? And yet, out of this sullying of God a gift from heaven comes to us. The curtain is ripped; all us dirty souls have free access.

We have, unfortunately, too often acted more like the Pharisees than like Christ. We have cleansed our churches, and made the way to forgiveness complicated. We have raised banners and shouted our purified theological positions from afar, refusing to be in communion, refusing to be hospitable for fear of becoming dirty ourselves.

The psychologist Carl Jung had a dream when he was about twelve years old. It concerned the cathedral in Basel where his father ministered. In this dream he looked over the glorious church on a summer's day, and then up into the sky where he saw God, seated on his throne. And from under the throne a divine turd fell and smashed the cathedral to pieces. He was surprised to feel a huge sense of release at the dream, rather than condemnation, and later connected the dream to his feelings about his father's austere Protestantism, a faith he felt had been 'purified to the point of sterility', a faith which God wanted to re-fertilize with some divine dirt.

Are we robust enough in Christ's saving work to inhabit living, dirty churches? Or are we happier in our white-wash sepulchers? Nothing can live in a sterile operating theater. It's too clean. These Freegans had got to the heart of my fear about dirty food; God did the same with Peter. 'Who are you prepared to accept?' he challenged him. 'Can dirty Gentiles be Christians too?' This challenge remains with us. Next time you pass a

dumpster of discarded food, think about who God might be calling you to accept. And think about opening the lid, and tucking in to a dangerously free feast.

¹Matthew 8: 3

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