

Vomiting And Its Treatment – Judy Cox

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-18, 21-23

Have you ever been vomited on? Or (at least in your conscious memory) vomited on someone? Humiliatingly, I vomit with motion sickness and altitude sickness. Coming down the winding canyon from the Peak to Peak Highway to Boulder, Colorado, thinking I'd surely outgrown those issues, I was proved spectacularly wrong—all over a rental car. HOW I wished I'd admitted my problems and brought a barf bag, just in case. Good times.

My worst vomit story, though, comes from a friend whose boss used to trap her at her desk, and vent to her regarding how he felt everyone mistreated him. Perhaps he just didn't think how he was using her, but he expressed every bitter feeling unfiltered, just blurting it all out. Our poor young friend confessed: "I feel vomited on!"

Two weeks ago Pastor Niquita shared how the stuff of bodies is now her daily reality. She never thought the contents of baby diapers would take over her conversations, or how often she'd WEAR (former) stomach contents. Remember?!? Following her lead, and that of our scriptures today, I want to further explore this (scriptural) concept of vomit. ☺ Or "vomit" (if you have a health care background), or puke, or barf, or toss your cookies—pick your favorite term.

We're back in the Gospel according to Mark. We stepped aside with the lectionary to hear John tell of the miraculous feeding and walking on water, with the Bread of Life sermon following it. Now back with Mark, just after his telling of those same miracles, we find the same sort of contrast between the Bread of Life and manna, between Jesus and Moses, between "capital dubya" Word and the Torah. Jesus' opponents obsess over hands, and Jesus refocuses them on the heart. And we'll also hear about vomit!

Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem act like opponents, not surprisingly. In this gospel they've already accused him of blasphemy; they've objected to his eating with sinners, and breaking the Sabbath—all having to do with purity guidelines, boundary markers of Jewish identity. In chapter 3 they accused him of serving The Satan. Now they're criticizing his disciples for not keeping other purity guidelines, not observing the ritual hand-washing that had also come to define what it meant to be a Jew.

These Pharisees as a Jewish group emerged after the Exile; thinking back over their history, the Jews saw that their failure to keep the Law had led to that exile. They developed traditions which either made the OT laws more clear, or applied the laws' principles to new situations. So with these traditions they sincerely tried to keep the Law that their forebears had treated casually, to "build a fence around the Law." They wanted, finally, to "do it right". We might call them the "holiness wing" of Judaism. In their earnestness to obediently protect Israel's separateness, their identity as a holy people of a holy God, they tried to incorporate into the daily life of all Israelites the ritual purity concerns formerly held only by priests and Temple. These guidelines ordered the world by organizing and classifying times, persons, and things, especially food. Following what they saw as scriptural principles, it was essential to define what was allowed, or not, clean or

unclean. Food rules specified not only what might be eaten, but out of which dish, and with whom, when and where. Since how they lived mattered, they paid very careful attention! Doesn't sound so bad, does it? Why would Jesus so oppose this group? He doesn't always—sometimes he supports them, and their reading of Scripture. But here?

Jesus sees through them and exposes them, perhaps even to themselves—reveals them, outs them. He calls them hypocrites—actors who play a part. (In English it implies deliberate dishonesty; instead, this suggests an unaware and maybe even self-satisfied disconnect between principle and behavior, inconsistency without discernment.) Quoting Isaiah, Jesus rips them for their lip-service of God, while their heart is far away, uninvolved. He accuses them of neglecting the Law while rigidly holding to human traditions. Later in Mark he will identify loving the Lord God with all you are—heart, soul, mind and strength—as the 1st commandment. So when their hearts are uninvolved, they ARE neglecting the command of God!

Apparently they started with wanting to “get it right” and ended up focusing on going through the motions (just like us sometimes?!). Their hearts had disengaged. At least with these Pharisees, arguing here with Jesus, they were so “majoring on the minors” as to set those traditions higher than the God's specific claims. In verses the lectionary omits Jesus unpacks this with his example about Corban. They override the command to honor parents—“oops, that money is dedicated to God, so I guess I can't use it to help my parents, too bad.” (This in spite of the clear warning from Deuteronomy 4 that we heard today, not to *add anything to what I command you*.) Jesus concludes: *and you do many things like this!*

The scene changes—Jesus is speaking to the crowd now. And he's addressing our human condition, not just the Pharisees': *listen to me, all of you*, he begins. He's outing all of us! More than that, he's diagnosing all of us.

He shifts focus away from eating in ritually clean or unclean ways. According to Torah, food would become defiled or unclean by handling with unwashed hands, and some foods were unclean in and of themselves. Yet Jesus says, radically: *there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile*. Eugene Peterson paraphrases—you were waiting for this, weren't you?: *It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life; it's what you vomit—that's the real pollution*. (Many ancient manuscripts include here: *Let anyone with ears to hear listen*. “Don't you see,” Jesus the Great Physician says, “you're sick—you're vomiting! Pay attention!”)

Even the disciples don't understand—the Pharisees aren't the only clueless ones (which should make us all feel better)! *Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see*, Jesus says? (Or, in The Message, *Are you being willfully stupid?*) He leaves off “unclean hands” concerns entirely, focusing on the unclean heart. *It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come...*

Careful, even scrupulous, attention belongs here!—to the heart, not the hands. In Biblical culture the heart wasn't the center of emotions, as we today to assume. Various emotions were related to other organs, though: compassion, for example, with the gut, anger with the gall bladder. These emotions were considered secondary, not defining the final character of the person.

What mattered most, so thought located at the body's core, literally in the heart, were the values people held and demonstrated by their actions, and responses to others. *It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.* From the heart spring the evil motivations, evil devisings, that he lists. This is the *vomit* that *pollutes* (or *poisons* or *contaminates*): sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries, greeds, evildoings, deceit, sexual license, envy, slanders, arrogances, boastful folly (behaviors, activities involving both body and mind, not simply attitudes—most in the plural here—all reflecting disordered values). *All these evil things come from within and defile a person.* Or, *All these are vomit from the heart. THERE is the source of your pollution.* Today's Epistle text focuses, with James' signature concern, on the problem of "verbal vomit" in particular, but could be summarizing Jesus with this umbrella description: *sordidness and rank growth of wickedness.*

Reading Parker Palmer, an influential leader in higher education, on circles of trust, I came across his description of "trusting one's inner teacher and hearing its voice." Much as I respect Parker Palmer and his Quaker tradition, I can't completely follow him here. For in this 7th chapter of Mark, to quote N.T. Wright, Jesus "is NOT saying that if we get in touch with our deepest feelings, or learn to listen to what our heart is truly telling us, we will find our real identity and thereby discover happiness, fulfillment, or whatever..." What if our truest feelings and values prove to be adulterous, greedy and arrogant? What if, like the boss of our "vomited-on" friend, my "unbridled tongue" springs from self-absorption and brooding resentment instead? Their presence in my heart does not validate them—it leads to the diagnosis of my sickness! No wonder I'm vomiting!

Jesus ISN'T calling all external and physical things either irrelevant or bad, nor the internal/spiritual automatically good. Rather, both good and bad actions, which are external and physical, spring from internal and spiritual sources. He refocuses the discussion on human motivation and intention, the "poisoned wells" or "infected hearts," the true problem to which purity laws were pointing. ALL we humans have a problem!

So if we want to be JUST like the Pharisees, we'll now start arguing about original sin and total depravity—majoring on the minors ourselves, missing completely how WE'RE the ones exposed here! Jesus doesn't say that only evil comes from the human heart. He follows no rabbit trails about how we got this way. He deals with the reality of our dilemma now. Our hearts and motivations ARE poisoned, infected, corrupted—in purity language, contaminated or unclean. In this text Jesus stands as the Great Physician, ruthlessly diagnosing our condition; we, his critically ill patients, persist in denial about our desperate condition.

James is such a great conversation partner for Mark today! Thank you, lectionary! Per James, we're vomiting, and in denial, deceiving ourselves and forgetting what we're like in the divine mirror held up to us. James insists that it's OUR job to "do our due diligence"—and grab a barf bag! Acknowledge that we're sick and spewing, and work to contain the damage! He points us toward spiritual disciplines, if you will, spiritual disciplines like holding our tongue (or silence!) and others: *be quick to listen, slow to speak ... be DOERS of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves...bridle [your] tongues...care for orphans and widows...keep oneself unstained...* We must demonstrate our values by our actions. How we live does matter; what we DO matters. God's grace comes to us—per James, *the implanted word ... has the power to save*

our souls (I love that the alternative reading is *power to heal our souls!*) But our own role is not passive. Practices CAN reorient and shape us, as we respond to God's response-enabling grace. (A better image for spiritual disciplines might be the cast placed on a broken leg, so it heals properly. But since we're in Mark 7 today, let's stick with vomiting.) Grab that barf bag! We are called to receive, to respond, and to act.

But as our gospel text makes clear, practices disconnected from the heart won't reorient values and motivations, making our hearts pure. Jesus won't settle for anything less. Our Great Physician not only diagnoses our illness, and helps us find and hold those barf bags. He also gives us his very self as the medicine that heals us.

As disciples of Jesus we are called, as John Wesley reminds, to "entire holiness of heart and life." Woe is us if we think, like the Pharisees, that we get to holiness by washing hands or food or drink avoidance. Jesus makes it clear: our hearts, our motivations, our intentions are infected, and the arena for God's healing. Jesus intends to occupy and heal our hearts as the center of who we are, our values, our intentions, our motivations. When our children speak of "asking Jesus into their hearts," they're speaking powerfully!

So how beautiful on this day, considering these texts, that we still hear the echoes of Jesus' *I AM the Bread of Life*. The Kingdom, the reign of God, means Jesus' life, his very self in us—his motivations, ours. As Pastors Niquita and Ben both showed us, we're invited to CONSUME Jesus, to take his life into our own, that we may take on his characteristics, his values, his intentions.

And so we come to the Lord's Table. We come knowing, especially today, that this also is the Pharmacy of God, where we receive the divine medicine that can heal what ails our hearts.