

Defining Defiling

Perhaps you've heard the old adage, "Bad decisions make the best stories."

My older brother is an emergency physician in North Carolina. He could and would readily give the anecdotal support for that adage... frequently his best stories involve the campers at the infield at the Coca Cola 600. It's not pretty.

One year, for Christmas, I gave him a copy of *Darwin Awards*. Are you familiar with *The Darwin Awards*? It's really quite a horrible book – it's folks who remove themselves from the gene-pool in particularly spectacular fashion. The case studies aren't funny, but the near misses can be a good read... One good example is of an environmentalist who wanted to make a point of conservation by depriving people of electricity. He contrived to do so by sawing through a 69,000-volt line. With a tree saw. Wearing dishwashing gloves for insulation.

Apparently with excellent medical care, he has suffered no permanent damage.¹

Anyhow, I gave Brent this book one year, and he said, "I don't need to read this. My job is fighting natural selection *every single day*."

Of course, the point is that foolishness is really only funny when nobody loses an eye.

The same is true of what *defiles* a person.

If you think the matter of defiling oneself is a cheery topic for a Sunday morning, I can assure you it was no cheerier when I sat down to write this past week.

I don't know that we often give much thought to defilement as a matter of weekly course.

But, perhaps it's not a bad thing to consider as we prepare ourselves to come to the Lord's table.

In a city where I once lived, I drove past a series of bars of ill-repute on my way to work each day. One day, the marquee out front read, "Just like Cheers!" I thought to myself, "Given what goes on in there, somehow I don't think they want to go where everybody knows their name."

But you and I both know the truth is there is really nothing funny about being defiled.

This morning, we encountered two different perspectives on defiling oneself in Mark's Gospel.

First, we have the Pharisees assessing the behavior of the disciples.

Then we have Jesus's rebuttal of their point of view.

First, we have a human construct – a social pressure to observe the niceties of ritual hand washing.

¹ <http://darwinawards.com/stupid/stupid2008-04.html>

Mind you, I have nothing against hand washing or Pharisees. The Pharisees were concerned with making faith practice accessible to the people of Israel, taking out the guesswork of faith so that anyone could keep the law just as our lesson from Deuteronomy indicated this morning. But that is not what is going on here with the Pharisees, not this time. What we get from the Pharisees in this moment is a “gotcha game” with the law. This is using an arbitrary metric to determine what constitutes acceptable behavior.

Then we have Jesus’s rebuttal. It’s a particularly interesting rebuttal because Mark, who rarely interprets the story for the reader, tells us that Jesus is declaring all foods clean. It’s a clarifying moment. It is Jesus saying to his disciples and to the Pharisees all at the same time, “Get your eye on the ball.”

And then he goes about defining defiling.

If you ever needed a primer on how to defile oneself, here it is. It’s a semi-systematic listing of paradigmatic things that one can do to defile oneself. It’s semi-systematic, because it’s not exhaustive. There are plenty more things one can do to defile oneself. And here’s what strikes me about it – everything on it is a way to devalue and denigrate yourself or someone else.

Everything on this list is an opportunity to be *less than God created you to be*.

You know, nobody ever sets out to do that. It seems to sneak up doesn’t it?

It starts with an insecurity; a hang-up.

It slips into a need for affirmation.

Temptation sidles up, looking like an opportunity.

It slides into decision.

It slinks into action.

Jesus uses fornication and adultery as two great examples of defiling oneself.

I suspect he chose these because he knew how destructive to self and others these particular behaviors are. They are community destroyers precisely because one can’t do them by oneself. And they are humanity destroyers because they make us *less than we’re created to be*.

In nearly twenty years of parish ministry, I have never once heard someone say in their pre-marital counseling that they expected to be unfaithful to their spouse.

And yet, there’s an app for that. There are several, actually.

And the truth is, I’m not really interested in psychoanalyzing the architecture of an affair. Nor am I particularly interested in classifying persons as defiled or not.

We are interested in understanding redemption.

The Pharisees wanted to reduce faithfulness to a practice of hand washing – and the like, whatever little rituals people come up with to dictate what makes a person a good person or a bad person.

But, Jesus wanted them to go much deeper, to take a hard look at what diminishes our humanity.

He targeted a few behaviors as representative.

Please note closely this: Jesus said nothing about what makes a person *good* or *bad*, he talked about what makes us less than we are created to be.

Behaviors can lift us up. And behaviors can tear us down. What we do makes a difference.

But behaviors can never define our ultimate worth.

Which is to say that you can defile yourself six ways from Sunday but you can never make yourself anything other than a *beloved child of God*.

Jesus really does want us to go deeper in our own faith than hand washing. He wants us to understand our own behavior and feelings. He wants us to understand what diminishes the humanity of ourselves and others.

It's really easy to talk a lot about *humanity* and *defilement* and to leave it way up in the air, esoteric really, as to what makes for goodness and faithfulness. I think that is why Jesus is so concrete in his answer to the disciples.

Discernment means asking concrete questions. If you want to know how to live a life that shows people that you're a follower of Jesus Christ, *behavior matters*.

To get specific, here are a couple of sample questions we can use to interrogate our behavior, some will sound familiar: *Is this kind?* - *Is this helpful?* - *Is this necessary?* - *Am I going to regret this?* - *What might I be about to damage or destroy?*

Here is a bigger question, *When I am sitting on the porch at "the Home" and I'm ninety years old, and I look back over my life, what will I wish I'd done right now?*

It would be very easy to turn this passage today into an object lesson, "Do this, don't do that."

As object lessons go, it's a pretty useful one – behavior should have limits. But if all we do today is consider the reasonable limits of human behavior for the reduction of suffering, we can answer that with Aristotle's *Ethics*.

But Jesus wants us to go deeper. This is not just about non-sensical non-choices, "Should I be nice, or should I be a jerk"

"Do I really want destroy this person's sense of feeling valued, or am I just out for myself?"

It's about going deeper. It's about developing an *internal* life, an honesty with self about who God created you to be, and then being that person.

God created you to *be* human, not to be defiled.

The problem with defiling oneself is that it erodes at the underpinning of humanity that is our birthright. It erodes at what God created us for.

God didn't make us for cheapness... no, this is the God who, "*from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love.*"

And just as a behavior can leave us feeling a little less human than we know we are, just as a bad decision can leave us feeling a little less integrated with ourselves and each other, so too can a kindness begin the restorative work of redemption.

I read a wonderful essay by Brett Martin about a lunch he had with Jacques Pepin.

Martin had endured an excruciatingly slow-motion breakup that he said, “Left me living in the windowless basement of an old friend’s house in Brooklyn. Mornings, I lay in the complete darkness, listening to the shuffling and creaking as he and his wife and two children prepared for the day. There had been a time when I still felt close to that domestic future, but now the truth of my life had been revealed: I was no man. I was a troll in the cellar. Of all the fallout, physical, psychological, and emotional – one effect was most worrisome: I had lost my appetite.”

Broke, he took on a freelance assignment from a friend at GQ magazine, to interview one of the first celebrity chefs, Jacques Pepin, for his tips on designing a home kitchen.

He began the interview by apologizing for taking up the chef’s time. “No, no, don’t be ridiculous.” Back and forth they went... gas stove, but electric oven... Freezer drawer, not side by side... Most gadgets are useless... As he prepared to leave, Pepin’s assistant asked if he wanted something to eat. Assuming it was just a courtesy, he returned the courtesy asking, “Will you join me?”

Pepin, he wrote, “Looked at me as though I might have hearing problems. ‘Of course! It’s lunchtime.’”

As they ate, the chef asked, “What do you think of the consommé?”

It needed salt. But more than that, being treated like someone who should be asked was balm for his weariness. And so as lunch progressed, Martin noted he realized his appetite was returning and he was ravenous. He grabbed hunks of bread and slathered them with pate. He gnawed the bones of the lamb chops. “If Pepin noticed, he didn’t say.”²

Amazing what a good lunch can do, no? No, not just any lunch – only one seasoned with human kindness.

This is what we are made for: human kindness... defilement is anything that violates that God-created reality. And of course, the table is set, and ready for you and me, to restore us in every way that we need to be restored.

Beloved child of God, I hope you’ll wash your hands when they need to be washed, but so much more I hope you’ll remember always that it is God who made you, and it is for *humanity* that you were made.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

² Brett Martin, *The Chef Who Saved Me* in *The Week*, August 21, 2015. P36