

"Won't Somebody PLEASE think of the children!"

A "moral panic" is when people fear something or someone evil threatens the community's morals, values, or well-being. The threat usually has some kernel of truth, and then is exaggerated and amplified. Anger is whipped up. The scapegoat, the target of the moral panic, gets blamed for much more than what actual danger (if any) they present. This moral panic exposes what society fears, or who they fear, much more than it actually addresses a harm.

Ever watched The Simpsons? Mrs. Lovejoy is the face of moral panic. Her catchphrase is, "Won't somebody PLEASE think of the children!" Her hysterics are more than what is called for in the situation. And she says it anytime anything stirs up the public. Although this is comedy, comedy is based on real life.

For example... have you ever heard of the game Dungeons and Dragons? Maybe through Tom Hank's movie Mazes and Monsters? Hank's character learns – this game makes you fatally and forever crazy! Or maybe you read Jack Chick's "Dark Dungeons" tract. It also captures the moral panic around this game. In it, Marcie's game character dies, and so she goes and hangs herself. Debbie enters a witches' coven and casts magic on her father who disapproves of Dungeons and Dragons. Finally, Debbie is saved by a pastor who hosts a bonfire for all the occult paraphernalia "like your rock music, occult books, charms, [and] Dark Dungeons material."

Thousands of parents were, and some still are, worried Dungeons and Dragons is exactly what Jack Chick drew and Tom Hanks acted. The game is the gateway to Satan worship!

So what is the game actually? Actually, it's a bunch of people telling a collective story, doing math, and sharing food. The largest D&D group I was ever in was in seminary. And yeah, we met in a basement. It's where the school kitchen was. And we pastors and pastors' spouses met weekly to socialize, to tell a story of heroes fighting off marshmallow peeps and goblins; and shared a meal.

The moral panic of rock music, occult books, charms, and Dungeons and Dragons was... society's fear of youth. The youth were not liking the same things as their parents.

Pretty much every generation has a moral panic over the youth. Did your parents or their peers panic over what you liked as a teen?

The Beatles taught you to not cut your hair! Hippies taught you to go barefoot, wear tie-dye, have free love and question authority. And don't let me start on Elvis! TV stations were banned from showing his hips.

Every generation has its moral panic - with more or less actual danger. Currently people are worried about "brain rot" from using phones. Before it was video games. Movies. Marijuana. Homosexuality. Poisoned candy. Tobacco. Alcohol. Horse races. Playing cards. Women voters. Women drivers. White slavery. Dime novels. Witches. Catholics! No, I meant, Jews! No, I meant, Christians!

Again and again, society has moral panics. Sometimes there is actual danger, sometimes there is not – always, the situation is blown up out of hand.

Jesus is living in a moral panic. Or several, as we usually are. His time is trying to define what it is to be Jewish. They are facing the threat of Samaritans, who have most of the same scriptures, but worship at Mount Horeb instead of Mount Zion. And they have the threat of the Greeks and Romans, who have their own religions and philosophies. Some Jewish people are adopting Greek or Roman ideas like belief in an afterlife, or a world understood as evil and good in combat.

In our reading today, Jesus is teaching on the argument between Pharisees and Sadducees. He teaches that what defiles a person is what goes out of them. Not what goes in. Someone isn't a good or bad person depending on if they follow kosher laws - it matters if they do evil things. Someone is not evil or holy depending on their handwashing. If they get sick from not washing their hands, that sickness goes into the sewer. People ought to be judged on their impact on the world. Do they murder? Cheat on their spouse? Do they sexually abuse others? Steal? Lie? Slander? Have evil intentions? Judge on those impacts on society.

And then... Jesus is confronted with the Gentile moral panic.

Here comes this woman, clearly not Israelite; Not even Samaritan, or Jew-adjacent. Here is this woman - fully a Gentile - worshipping a foreign pantheon of gods - and from Syria - Phoenicia - historic enemy land of the Israelites - this woman approaches Jesus shouting, "CURE MY DAUGHTER!"

And Jesus ignores her. He ignores the shouting.

His disciples eventually ask Jesus to do something about this woman who is following them and shouting. "Jesus, send her away!" Jesus is inclined to keep ignoring her. He says he's here for the lost sheep of Israel, not this foreign-gods-worshipping woman.

But the woman comes and blocks Jesus' way. She kneels before him, begging, "Lord, help me!"

Jesus grouches, "It isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the little dogs."

She counters, "Yes, Lord, but even the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their Lord's table."

Did your ears perk up? The Lord's table. That's what we call communion. This woman wasn't raised in Judaism. And yet, she has faith in Jesus. She has enough faith to cross culture and religion; and gender and race boundaries; to beg from this holy man healing for her beloved daughter.

Jesus had just taught how to judge people on morality: judge on what they put out into the world. It isn't their lifestyles or preferences that matter. It's their impact on society that matters.

Now Jesus is challenged with his own teaching. Does that grace he taught extend to super outsiders like this woman?

Jesus hesitates.

But when pressed, he decides yes... even to extreme outsiders... what matters is what they are sending out into the world. This woman is sending out love - love of her daughter. She isn't Jewish and isn't following our God. But love has brought her to the communion table and so she is fed, too.

Jesus fights his own moral panic within himself and decides God's love is even bigger than he first was inclined to believe.

I had a similar experience last weekend. I had just taught on accepting people. I had read the book on accepting people as they wear what they want, even if it isn't what I would ever wear. I had spoke on Joseph, and his princess dress.

And then we had the PRIDE cookout. And there were people dressed in clothes I definitely would never wear. I felt the judgement in me rising. I also was aware of what I had just preached. I felt the moral panic, "Think of the children!" and also the words of Jesus saying, "Let the little children come to me." Like Jesus, I had to choose: just how far am I willing to acknowledge God's grace and love?

How big do I think my god is? Big enough to love all people? Big enough to not care what we wear but care what we do? Big enough to shower blessings, the bread of heaven, the living waters on all peoples of all faiths, all cultures, all genders, all and all?

I concluded yes. My god is that big. God loves all. Blesses all.

I chose to cap my judgement. Keep it inside. Let it go to the sewer instead of spewing foul across all who seek community, connection, and came for such.

I pray the next time God helps me meet the challenge again. Because I know I'll be challenged. It is human nature! We are constantly navigating values, morality, society, self, norms and standards. And each generation's youth will find something to define themselves and spark a panic in the adults.

I pray I am offended; and also setting the offense aside, as Jesus did, as the mother did. I pray I can be like them, and choose to cross boundaries and extend love.

This reminds me of the words of Rachel Held Evans. She said, "what makes the Gospel offensive isn't who it keeps out, but who it lets in." (from the book "Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again")

I pray we keep getting offended by God's love that fills up the table, overflows the table, covers the floor in blessings, blessings that go out the door and go everywhere we think blessings ought not. I pray we are inclined to think, "Won't somebody PLEASE think of the children!" and then we do so, and we see how the children love across race and sex, across language and culture; how they love and accept in an innocent way we all can learn from. I pray we're offended by who God lets in.

And then we let that offense change us ever towards a more inclusive world.

Amen!

Scripture Reading – August 16, 2026 – for Little Current United Church

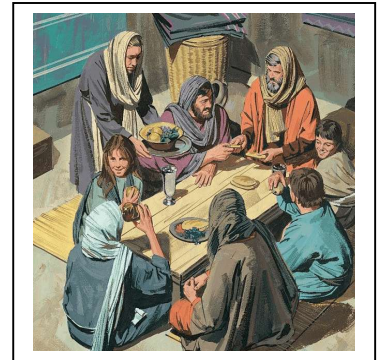
Matthew 15: 10-20, 21-38 NRSV Ue

15 Things That Defile

¹⁰ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶ Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

The Canaanite Woman’s Faith

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.



Jesus Cures Many People

²⁹ After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. ³⁰ Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the maimed, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, ³¹ so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

Feeding the Four Thousand

³² Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for the crowd because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat, and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.” ³³ The disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?” ³⁴ Jesus asked them, “How many loaves have you?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” ³⁵ Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, ³⁶ he took the seven loaves and the fish, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ³⁷ And all of them ate and were filled, and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. ³⁸ Those who had eaten were four thousand men, besides women and children. ³⁹ After sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

May God’s spirit shape our understanding of these words.

And may they awaken in our hearts