

Getting dirty, or having to do something that makes us feel filthy, is not something that everyone looks forward to. Let's face it, most of us are not little kids anymore, and therefore the idea of splashing, or playing around in the mud, or having to get our hands dirty, isn't necessarily very appealing to us. True we may have fond memories of building sandcastles at the beach, of throwing cow pies at an annual contest, or of digging in our backyards for dinosaur fossils or buried treasure, but unless we have an outdoor hobby or a job that leads to our unkemptness and uncleanness, we would probably rather be clean and unblemished.

And yet there are times in life when we may have to be willing to spend some time in the dirt or the muck! I imagine that actor Mike Rowe would probably agree with me, for he did this exact same thing during the eight seasons of his show *Dirty Jobs*, which can be watched on Discovery Plus. Although I never had a chance to watch his program, I have seen previews for it, and I recall that in each episode Mike performed difficult, strange, disgusting, and messy occupational duties alongside employees who did those tasks regularly.

He had the glorious privilege of working as a sludge cleaner, a sewer inspector, a pig farmer, a Chinatown garbage collector, a roadkill cleaner, and those are just some of the things he did during the show's first season. I've been told that the cool thing about *Dirty Jobs*, is that even though Mike would often engage in self-deprecating humor, or would frequently make dirty jokes, he rarely poked fun at the laborers he worked with. Nearly every job was more difficult than he expected, and this led him to regularly express his admiration and respect for the workers' skills and their willingness to take on jobs that most people avoid.

Perhaps, in some way, many of the stories that we read about Jesus in the Gospels, can be compared to, or seen as, an episode of *Dirty Jobs*! After all, like Mike, Jesus was willing to enter into our world, he was willing to take on our flesh

and our blood, he was willing to experience the filth and the muck of an earthly existence, in order to open our eyes and to help us understand how we can become clean from our own sinfulness through the continual outpouring of God's grace. Think about it, throughout his earthly ministry Jesus was often found either hanging out in crummy or disheveled places, such as graveyards, fishing boats, and even an actual jail cell before his crucifixion.

He also hung out with people, who were considered to be gross or foul by either their professions or by how they were viewed by the society of his day. As we read about Jesus, we observe him associating with lepers, prostitutes, Samaritans, adulterers, and all kinds of sinners. Even the men who comprised his main group of followers consisted of fishermen, a tax collector, and a political freedom fighter known as a religious zealot (zelet).

In fact, in our story this morning, we actually witness Jesus and his willingness to get his hands dirty. Rather than performing his healing miracle by simply speaking the words, or through a gentle touch, as we often find him doing in scripture, he actually spits on the ground and makes mud with his saliva. Jesus then takes this mucky goop and smears it on the unseeing eyes of the man. I believe that he does this in order to guide the blind man, the religious leaders, his disciples, and us, to the realization that we are often blind to what sin is, we are blind to who Jesus is, and we are blind to what God through Jesus is calling us to do. Whether we want to admit it or not, most of us are sightless when it comes to how we are to live our lives in this world!

At the very beginning of today's story, Jesus challenges the common perception of sin held by the people of his day. He opens the eyes of his disciples, and our eyes, to help us understand that suffering isn't always a direct result of sin. Back then people believed that a birth defect, an illness, a person's misfortune was caused by their disobedience to God. People nowadays often believe the same

thing; it seems like whenever an earthly tragedy, or natural disaster occurs, there are individuals who attribute the catastrophe to a lack of faith, or they cite some kind of failure with regards to following God's law. Yet, Jesus tells his disciples that not only had the blind man done nothing wrong, but that God's works would soon be revealed through this sightless man.

Now just as our eyes are opened to the idea that sin is not necessarily found in a person's troubles or calamities, we are also provided with an opportunity to see that sin is not essentially found in violation of the commandments either. Today we witness Jesus kneading mud and healing on the Sabbath to expose and destroy the idea of trusting one's knowledge or obedience to God's law. By his actions Jesus was saying, "I am ruining these laws. I am destroying the false security you place in your ideas that you can obtain righteousness through following them. I am replacing the law with myself. You can choose to either trust your obedience to the commandments or you can trust me." This is supported later when the Pharisees admit that they are disciples of Moses.

Perhaps this is why at the end of our story we are left to ponder if the Pharisees and religious leaders are sinners, if they are the ones who are blind. Think about it, they believe they already know everything there is to know about God, they think they see everything, understand everything, yet they are not open to the revelations of God in Jesus, or to the teaching that they could have received from the formerly blind man. In fact, after his sight is restored, during his second interview with the Pharisees he asks them if they want to become disciples of Jesus, and they reviled him for his comment. In other words, his suggestion upset them so much. that they hated for him for his suppositions, perhaps this is why they drive him out of the synagogue.

Throughout the story I believe Jesus is trying to shed some light, and help us see that sin can be understood as resisting Jesus, in our lack of understanding of

who Jesus is, and what he is calling us to do. The more I read today's Gospel, the more I came to realize that the blind man's understanding of Jesus is slowly transformed as the narrative progresses. In fact, just as our Lord was willing to get dirty, the sightless man learns that he has to get dirty as well. Look at how his encounter with Jesus begins. He is sitting there minding his own business when all of a sudden, he feels a muddy goop being spread over his eyes, and then he hears a stranger tell him, "go and wash in the pool of Siloam."

We don't know exactly how far the man has to walk after receiving his mudpack in the eyes, but it could have been quite a hike. John tells us that Jesus encounters the man after leaving the temple but does not reveal the precise location of their meeting. If Jesus put the mud in the man's eyes right outside the temple compound, then the man had to walk at least five hundred yards - the length of five football fields to wash the filth from his face! Quite a distance for a blind man to cover, groping and stumbling in the dirt, while trying to ignore the jeers of the crowd: "Nice mudmask, looking good oh sightless one, that muck definitely improves your appearance.

It isn't hard for us to imagine that it was not a pleasant walk. It's degrading, embarrassing, humiliating. But the man has been touched by Jesus, and for some reason he begins to believe. His faith leads him to obey the Lord's command to go and wash and we witness firsthand that the one who called himself "the light of the world" is able to bring an end to a man's condition that had led him to live in lifelong darkness. Besides, what has the blind man got to lose? His pathetic progress down the rocky streets of Jerusalem would be mocked by townspeople whether he had mud on his face or not.

So, he obeys, he goes, he washes ... and comes back and is able to see. The dirt-and-spit remedy opens his eyes, and he proceeds to testify that it was Jesus who gave him his vision. Standing before the Pharisees, he says, "He put mud on

my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see He is a prophet." By his willingness to get dirty the former blind man begins to see Jesus in a whole new light, and the next time he is interrogated by the religious leaders, when they bring him back for a second interview, they ask him if Jesus is a sinner, and he replies, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

This response reminds me of the lyrics that we find in our first hymn this morning, which was written by John Newton. His story is also another excellent illustration about receiving sight and being made clean by the amazing outpouring of God's grace. Newton was born in London, half a century before the American Revolution, to a mother of superb spiritual qualities and to a nondescript father. His mother died when he was six. Five years later he went to sea with his father who was a ship's captain. He became a midshipman and for a time led a wild existence, living in utter disgrace. He rejected the God of his mother, he renounced any need of religion. and he lived an irresponsible and sinful life. Eventually he became a slave trader, crossing the ocean several times as captain of slave ship, responsible for terrible human degradation among the captives he had crowded on board. But grace was always a factor in his life. He survived a deadly fever in Africa, and his ship survived a terrible storm which almost killed him.

Finally, dissatisfied with his life, he began reading the writings of Thomas Kempis. Somehow, the Holy Spirit began stirring inside his soul, awakening him from his sin, urging him toward salvation until he finally gave his heart to Christ. He was so thoroughly converted, in fact, that he felt a call from God to enter the ministry. He was eventually ordained in 1781 and accepted a pastorate in Olney, England. But Newton's disgraceful past never left his memory, and he was completely dumbfounded over the privilege of living joyously free under the divine grace of God. In an intense moment of inspiration, when he was thinking of

the wonder of the grace of God which had saved even a wretch like him, he wrote the hymn, "Amazing grace."

Perhaps like the Blind man in today's Gospel, or even John Newton, we need to allow Jesus to open our eyes so that we can see our Lord more clearly. Sometimes this can only happen when we are willing to get dirty, when we are willing to go out into the world to confront the filth and the muck that we encounter in our neighborhoods, communities, and in our society. Perhaps we also need to be willing to take on the kind of dirty jobs that most people avoid such as: feeding the hungry, visiting those who are sick or in prison, building a home for the homeless, seeking to help people in need in whatever way we can, and by inviting others to share in our relationship with Jesus.

John's Gospel this morning tells us that "Siloam" means sent and throughout the Gospels Jesus is referred to as the one whom God has sent. Like our Lord, who was sent as the Word to reveal the Father, and to help open the eyes of those blind to the love, mercy, and grace of God, as Disciples of Christ we too are called to go and do likewise. And thanks be to God for that! Amen