

We don't often find high-tech toilets in the United States, but in other parts of the world, they are not uncommon. The seats themselves are sometimes heated, and on the wall next to them there may even be a series of touch "buttons" to select a variety of different features. But when all is said and done, even if it is pretty, made of chrome, features neon flashing lights and an assortment of electronic flushes, a toilet is still just a toilet.

But sanitation issues are extremely important, especially in the developing countries of the Third World. That's why the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation put money into funding toilet technology for countries such as China and India. Several years ago, to help spur technological development in waste management, the foundation created an initiative called the "Reinvent the Toilet Challenge."

A recipient of one of their grants was the University of Colorado. The \$780,000 award they received was used to "develop a solar toilet that uses concentrated sunlight, directed and focused with a solar dish, to disinfect liquid-solid waste and produce biological charcoal that can be used as a replacement for wood or chemical fertilizers." And while the Gates Foundation is trying to improve toilet and sewage systems in a way that will benefit needy areas around the world, Jesus talks about a toilet in our Gospel story today to make a powerful point -- to which we'll get to in a moment. But first, let's briefly explore some context.

To see what's actually going on in our narrative, we need to go back to the very beginning of Chapter 15, where we find some Pharisees and scribes who made a special trip from Jerusalem to confront Jesus about some hygiene issues related to their priestly laws and traditions. They're "from Jerusalem," so the bystanders and the disciples know that this is serious. It's like if you got a visit from the "feds." These are the big boys. The big guns! They're from Jerusalem, and you don't mess with them. These religious big wigs are looking for Jesus and they

ask him, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat."

Now, I'm not sure if we want our children hearing everything Jesus has to say in today's narrative. Mom and dad, imagine if the next time you asked your son or daughter to go wash up before supper they were to reply, "But Jesus said, according to Saint Matthew, 1520, that "to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

If your child should ever cite this scripture passage, you can always respond, by saying the Bible also says, 'Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.' And the Bible also says 'Honor your father and mother ... that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.' Now if you want to have a long and happy life, go wash your hands please!

Getting back on point: Jesus in our story is addressing an accusation that he and his disciples do not honor the tradition of the elders, as evidenced by the fact that they do not wash their hands as prescribed by the law. Of course, Jesus is all over this, and from the very moment the Pharisees confront him we know that he has a great response ready and waiting for them on standby!

The answer that Jesus provides them with, is an astonishing analogy between a toilet and a wicked heart. He starts with the toilet: "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" This is the first part of the metaphor. The word that the NRSV translates as "sewer" is the Greek word *aphedron*. It refers to a place where human waste is dumped, that is, a privy or a toilet. If you don't want to take my word for it; try looking it up!

The astonishing part about all this, is not that Jesus is talking about toilets here, but that he says the human heart, our inner consciousness, is also like a toilet, because it is from this cesspool that "evil intentions such as murder, adultery,

fornication, theft, false witness, slander" are expelled, either through the mouth, or by our actions, and once they are out they pollute everything around us. "These," he says to his startled audience, and to the prim and proper Pharisees, "are what defile a person," not the fact that their hands have been washed or not washed.

Of course, this is not the only time that Jesus uses a smelly reference to describe blatant hypocrisy. Later on in Matthew we read of Jesus addressing the "scribes and Pharisees" yet again with some harsh words. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." For Jesus, hypocrisy stinks, and in today's gospel story he makes it clear that our words and actions are a product of who we are, of what's really inside of us.

Ok, so if this is truly the case, how do we get rid of the stink? More than likely we will need more than an air freshener, more than a cosmetic approach. After all, a high-tech toilet with a warm seat and a lid that goes up and down with the touch of a button is still -- a toilet. The good news is that God has already installed a new system, something so radical and effective that the results are authentic, pure, sweet-smelling, wholesome and it benefits everyone.

The Bible calls it a new heart, or a new nature, and it is something we receive on account of God's grace through Jesus' death on the cross. In him we have been given a new life, as the apostle Paul makes clear in 2nd Corinthians, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

So how do we get this new system? Well...it has already been installed in us on the day we were baptized! But in order for it to work it takes some faith to activate it. We must walk in faith, walk in the Spirit, and recognize that we have

been given a new life, a new heart, a new nature, and that we are not to speak, or act, as though we've never encountered the living Christ. We are to live our lives as though being a child of God is an intentional lifestyle choice for us. We choose God. We say yes every day to God. We resist the inclination of our basic or immoral instincts. And the more we do this, the stronger we become.

In fact, the results are phenomenal! Check out Colossians 3, for example. When we live authentic lives; we do not lie to one another, we bear each other's burdens, we practice love, and we forgive one another. Our lives are full of what the apostle Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Like a person with bad breath who's unaware of the odor flowing from his or her mouth, too often we're unaware of the stench of our own hypocrisy. Yet, there's no need for us to be smelly, stinky Christians who obsesses about all the wrong things. We can worry less about certain "traditions" and more about whether we are presenting ourselves to God, and our sisters and brothers, as someone who's real, someone who cares, someone who doesn't look at labels or traditional prejudices, but instead embraces an authentic Christian walk that offers the scent, or the aroma, of gracious and loving acceptance.

As if to underscore what Jesus has said, St. Matthew immediately provides us with an illustration. Jesus is in modern-day Lebanon and encounters a woman. You can just hear the disciples Gasp! Matthew identifies this person as a "Canaanite" woman -- emphasizing her heritage as among the earliest inhabitants of that particular region. And being that she was a "Canaanite" it also meant that she was most likely a pagan and therefore was considered a longtime enemy of the Jewish monastic faith.

Jesus' encounter with a Gentile woman is daring, but with a Canaanite woman, it is doubly defiling. The strict behavioral codes of decency in Near

Eastern culture sternly frowned on women and men socializing. The brazen approach of this lone woman to Jesus and his disciples makes her character especially questionable.

Finally, not only is this stranger an unescorted Canaanite woman, but she has a daughter who is possessed by a demon. In an age in which it was a commonly held conviction that all diseases -- but especially demonic possession -- resulted from past sinfulness, this woman's character rating slips even further. What could she have possibly done in her life to have earned such a curse on her daughter? Yet, Jesus shows his disciples what it means to live as someone who is in touch with a law that's higher than the laws, traditions, and conventions of human society.

No self-respecting, or self-righteous person, in those days would have had anything to do with this woman, but Jesus does! And that's what we are to do! With a new "system" in place, a new nature, a new perspective, we are to be open to opportunities for sharing the good news. We are to be gracious and generous, kind and loving, merciful and compassionate to everyone we encounter.

When we live that kind of life, we can't help but offer up a sweet-smelling sacrifice of praise to God in the process! "For we are as St. Paul writes, "the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." We are called to live like Christ, and "walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." And that is way better than any kind of high tech commode we can build or invent, and I'm sure we can all agree that it's way more important and it most definitely smells better!