

the screen to church summer camp, where relationships get deep fast and feel very powerful. She writes, “Just like Jesus’ story about the Samaritan, [the characters some would think the least likely]—not the pastors or counselors or prayer team volunteers, but a group of out and proud gay men—bring such light into people’s lives it’s difficult to describe their work as anything other than holy. The men who make up the fab five aren’t just comforting and [caring]—they’re ministering. And the result looks surprisingly like some of the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, and kindness.”⁴ When these men drop into rural towns in the south, they may not be the person everyone wants or expects to pull them out of the ditch. But they act with love and mercy anyway. And when they leave, there are very few strangers left; everyone has turned into neighbors.

Jesus calls us to be on guard when a sense of disgust kicks up among groups of people, or even in ourselves. When he was asked to draw a boundary between people, at the request of the lawyer, Jesus refused. Instead, he told this story about love and compassion between people who were rivals, enemies, who were often disgusted with each other. He turned everyone’s expectations upside down. First by making clear that our own enemies may sometimes show us love much faster than our fellow insiders. And second, by urging us to show love not just to people near to us, and not just to those who seem worthy. But instead, to anyone who’s in need.

The story helps us understand Jesus’ message. Yet, the only real model for loving in this way is God. None of us are worthy, yet God loves us completely. God is probably disgusted with some of the things we do, as individuals and as a society. And yet God pushes past that, choosing to bind us up, put our hearts back together and carry us to safety, over and over again. That’s true for you and me, and even for the people who put us off with their tomato stained faces or raggedy toe nails, or worse. So we go out to try and do likewise. Like that good and faithful Samaritan did for the fellow in the ditch. Like God does for us.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



March 9, 2025

First Sunday of Lent

“An Ick Factor Turned to Love”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Luke 9:51-56 and Luke 10:25-38

Are you familiar with the idea of the “ick factor?” The term originated on the TV show *Ally McBeal* in the late 90s. The ick factor is the idea that you can be grossed out or put off by some small thing a person does or says. Like, the way they let the tomato sauce stick in the corners of their mouth after eating spaghetti. Or the way their toenails look when they wear sandals. It’s usually something innocuous that has an outsized reaction in us, and that puts us off from associating with the person. People often talk about “the ick” cropping up in a dating relationship, making it hard for the couple to carry on together. But it relates to other relationships, too. Psychology tells us that the ick factor is really just a mild feeling of disgust.

Disgust is a powerful emotion. Long ago, disgust might have kept us safe from eating rotting food. But in modern times, this feeling of disgust is a product of the way we’re socialized. Though it occasionally serves us well, disgust has also caused a lot of harm. Josh Rottman, a psychology professor, said, “disgust has evolved as a way to...embody a lot of xenophobia and bigotry. There’s a lot of good evidence that genocides and a lot of horrific things that have happened in society have been correlated in some way with disgust.”¹ When Nazis were preparing to murder Jews and others, they used terms like ‘parasite’ and ‘lice’ to describe them. Today, people in some circles are reviving the wide usage of a slur that starts with the letter “R” to refer to people with mental disabilities.² We should all be concerned that normalizing such awful words dehumanizes people and makes it easier for society to cast them aside. To be clear, we’re talking about the problematic nature of feelings of disgust aimed at other people just for being who they are. I do think we ought to be disgusted and troubled by behaviors that hurt others or are counter to the gospel; and we ought to work to stop those. But when it comes to a minor ‘ick’ feelings about another person, or if we notice how more serious forms of disgust are being stoked among us, those are opportunities to stop and think. Is the ick preventing us from loving our neighbors? Is disgust

1 Qtd. in Andrea Muraskin and Brittany Luse, “Did your date give you the ick? Here’s the science behind the feeling,” NPR, February 2, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2025/02/02/nx-s1-5273847/dating-ick-psychology-relationships-disgust>

2 See Justin Kirkland, “‘The basis of eugenics’: Elon Musk and the menacing return of the R-word,” March 3, 2025, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/03/r-word-right-wing-rise>

3 Muraskin and Luse.

4 Joy Netanya Thompson, “The Surprising Ministry of Queer Eye,” July 23, 2018, *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/articles/culture-opinion/surprising-ministry-queer-eye>

making us imagine that neighbors are really strangers, or even enemies? Maybe there's an opportunity to remember what commentator Brittany Luse says: "love is persevering against the ick."³

Surely there was some kind of ick factor at play between Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' time. The two groups were siblings and rivals, both descending from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were similar in many ways but different enough to argue bitterly over the proper place of worship and the right kind of religious leadership. When Jesus entered a Samaritan village in chapter 9, the people there refused to receive him because he was heading to the Jewish place of worship in Jerusalem. In his travels and in his story-telling, Jesus did not have to include Samaritans. But Jesus used the very real ick factor between the two groups to show the audacity of his message. He entered into the thick of that disgust to help us rethink who is deserving of compassion; to urge us to put our own disgust in check and replace it with love.

Luke's story in chapter 10 invites us to deal with disgust and love; strangers and neighbors. At the start, the lawyer wanted to make himself look right, so he put Jesus on the spot. He wanted to determine who was his neighbor and who wasn't. We are familiar with those discussions, too, as our country wrestles with who is an immigrant and who is a citizen, and what that actually means for people's lives. Like usual, Jesus did not answer the question the lawyer asked, just as I doubt he would clarify the kind of legal questions flurrying around us. Jesus answered a more important question. His answer focused on who is worthy of love. On how to put our ick factors in check when they get in the way of our compassion.

Now our familiarity with this parable has largely sanitized it for us. We do not flinch when we hear the words 'good Samaritan.' We don't realize how that title itself is a lingering result of disgust, implying as it does that all other Samaritans—who still exist today, by the way—must be bad people. So we have to try to rediscover the shock that was part of Jesus' first telling. We have to get in touch with the ick factor that those first characters might have felt about each other in order to feel the surprise they heard when Jesus revealed what happened.

Maybe we do that best by imagining we are the fellow in the ditch. We were traversing this dangerous stretch of highway where there would have been, in essence, no streetlights, no cellphone service, carjackers and drug dealers hiding in the shadows. If we were left there, beaten and bruised, we would probably expect someone like us to be the most likely candidate to help. A fellow Christian, a kindly neighbor, someone who looks and speaks like us. But in the parable, that wasn't who stopped. We can poke at all

kinds of reasons related to Torah or purity laws to explain why the Jewish Priest and Levite did not stop to help, even though they were most like the man in the ditch. By all standards of religion and faith, they should have helped. The fact that they didn't would have appalled Jesus' listeners.

So now, conjure up an image of whatever person disgusts you, a bit. I think each of us has to be honest with ourselves about that image to really get Jesus' message. Who is that someone you would not want bandaging your body? Someone you'd be afraid of and put off by, even as we might be ashamed to admit our disgust. Just think it in your mind. Certainly it's different for all of us: maybe a person who protests outside of women's health clinics holding those ugly signs; someone who burns an American flag; someone wearing a red ball cap with four white words on it; a trans woman wearing a dress or a woman in drag; someone strung out on drugs or in the midst of a mental health crisis. Keep the image in your mind, even though you're not proud to feel that way about someone else. But if we are the fellow in the ditch, that is exactly the person who stops to help us.

For Jesus' friends, that image of someone who put them off was of a Samaritan. Indeed, the unthinkable happened: the Samaritan stopped, nursed the man's wounds, bandaged him up, gave him a lift to a safe place to be in the care of someone who would keep watch. If you were the man lying there, half-dead, imagine your own mixed emotions: the initial disbelief, or fear, perhaps, when that person walks up. And then, that reflexive disgust being changed into gratitude. This was the person who kept you from dying. *This* was the one who showed you the mercy of a neighbor. Which is perhaps nearly the same as the love of God.

A few years ago I read an article that compared the TV show *Queer Eye* to this parable. *Queer Eye* features a group of five men—called the fab five—each an expert in a particular area of life: fashion, culture, food, interior design and personal grooming. They swoop in on someone whose life has been challenging and offer that person an overall makeover. Yes, clothes and hair, but also a deeper exploration of what's getting in the way of that person loving themselves for who they are. For many, every show is a tear-jerker because the emotions are raw and the transformations are so inspiring.

The fab five who host the show are all members of the LGTBQ community and they all embrace their unique personalities to help the person through their challenges. Each man, with a style all his own, is kind, vulnerable, intelligent, and humorous. An editorial in the Christian magazine *Sojourners* reflected on *Queer Eye* this way: "[These men] offer everything they have, everything they are, to help the [person] heal, feel less alone, get back on [their] feet." The author compares the fun and joy we see on