

The problem with the profane, and profanity



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

In Latin, the word *profanus* means “before the temple.” This raises an obvious question:

Who stands before the temple, and why? Do they need something? Are they locked out? Do they feel excluded? If they are judged “profane,” is this because they are unclean, unacceptable, unbelievers—modern lepers?

I find it interesting that people suffering from the disease of leprosy are often mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures and stories of Jesus. A Bible dictionary states that according to biblical texts: “Persons or objects afflicted with leprosy can pollute others.” They were not allowed to come into houses (especially “God’s House”) and had to perform specific rituals of purification (in Second Kings, Naaman had to dunk himself in the Jordan river seven times). Some religious leaders considered the dreaded disease a divine punishment. When Jesus was traveling between Samaria and Galilee, an unmasked group of lepers approached Jesus but maintained proper social distance (sound familiar?). He told them to go to

the temple and show the priests (who would not have let them in—profane as they were). The story says they were healed on the way to the temple, so problem solved. Only one comes back to thank Jesus for whatever it was that he did (see Luke 17—he often said their “faith” healed them, not something he did).

When religious authorities were out to get Jesus—presumably for being so profane—he was invited to eat at a follower’s home (Gospels differ on whose house he entered—Simon the leper, a Pharisee or Lazarus). Wherever he was, he caused controversy being in close proximity to other profane individuals; even the host couldn’t understand why he let a profane woman near him—didn’t he know “what kind of woman is touching him.” Apparently this was the last straw for one disciple—Judas—who was so disgusted he slipped away to betray his profane professor. No doubt he was breathing profanities as he scurried toward the temple.

Those who are left outside the temple, too profane to enter, have to form their own communities. Oddly enough, as the ancient story seems to suggest, God comes to earth as a Prophet of the Profane—profanity incarnate. He is considered an obscene outsider who incites crowds with obscenities (obscene: from a Latin word for “abominable.” Acts or words that are “offensive or disgusting by accepted standards of morality and de-

cency”).

What is it that offends us about the profane and their profanity? Swearing really bothers some people. But what does it mean to “swear”? A promise, an oath. Swearing, like profanity, is heard as irreligious, blasphemous, offending religious standards and sensitivities (though it is acceptable to swear an oath in public office or court, even though it ignores Jesus’ clear instruction against that). One international study suggests “people who use profanity are considered to be less deceptive and to have more integrity” (BBC, “Swearing,” May 17, 2021). We can tell someone means what they say!

And doesn’t it depend on who is saying the words? The word “damn” comes from biblical theology, so it seems that a clergyperson should be able to use the word accurately. Putting the word “God” in front of that sounds appropriate in context. In a seminary Psychology of Religion class the professor wrote all the profanities the class could come up with on the blackboard (probably good an administrator didn’t walk in). It was a good lesson in what words are offensive and why. If you think about it (don’t think TOO much about it), most “bad words” refer to sexuality, bodily functions or sacredness. Circles back to the “profane” as relating to the “not sacred.” So, if we’re so bothered by words that bring our bodies

to mind (or our mind to our body) then what is it that we find so horrible?

As I think back to many of the controversies we faced in chaplaincy, working with people in prison or on the streets, quite often the issue that caused the most tension in the community was about the profane. Who was outside the temple (church, synagogue) and what were they doing out there? When congregants complained about “those people” sleeping in church doorways, one elder asked: “What happened to ‘forgive us our trespasses?’” A pastor told the same church members it was “unconscionable” to chase people from church property. Yet another pastor said: “Our mission has come right to the doorstep!” In my mind, those were creative, compassionate, perhaps truly Christian responses to real profanity.

Who or what guards the sanctuaries (the pure places) from those who would come in and profane the sacred space? Barred doors, barriers, beliefs, bigotry—each can block free access.

Isn’t that profane? Damned if I know.

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