

Story and Meditation: Devotion Within and Without

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James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-23

by Eric Anderson

The young pueo had learned many things from his mother. He'd learned how to hop. He'd learned how to fly. He'd learned how to circle and even to hover while scanning the grasses below with his big eyes, looking for lunch. He'd learned how to drowse in the sun. He'd also learned how to take a bath.

A pueo doesn't bathe in water. A pueo digs his head into loose soil and flips it back over his body, fluffing his feathers and spreading the dust about, then flipping his wings and shaking the dust away again. It sounds strange to take a bath in dirt, but that's what a pueo does, and this young pueo's mother had schooled him well. She warned him, more than once, to take his baths in dry soil. "Don't go bathing in damp places," she told him. "Don't go hopping about in the mud."

In some ways the young pueo and the young human are a little bit alike. The pueo got really curious about this. What was the difference between dry soil and wet soil? What, actually, was mud? On the grasslands between Mauna Kea and Hualalai, the pueo didn't see a lot of rain or experience very much mud.

There came a day, however, when the clouds came through the valley between the mountains and brought rain and rain and rain. The dry ravines became streams. The grasses swelled and turned green. And the hollow spaces became puddles.

The pueo, flying above all this, was fascinated to see a kolea land by one of the puddles and actually walk right into it. It plunged its body into the water and flung the droplets about with its wings. The pueo was fascinated. What would this feel like, he wondered.

He found his own puddle – it wasn't hard – and settled down next to it. Somewhat timidly, he poked a foot into it. It didn't feel anything but wet. He got the rest of his body in and, imitating the kolea, made the water fly about. It rapidly got pretty muddy, and pretty soon he was a very sad sight.

He was a sight that his mother was not going to be happy about, he realized.

There was no taking a dust bath to deal with this, not in the rain. All he could do was sit with his wings outspread and hope the falling drops washed the mud away. He sat and spread and shook and finally decided that he'd pass his mother's inspection.

He didn't, of course. She spotted the mud on his feet immediately, and there were muddy spots on his neck and even about the tufted feathers on his head.

"Did you bathe in the mud?" she asked.

"Oh, no," he said. "I'm just wet from the rain."

"From the rain," she said. "Just wet from the rain."

"Absolutely," he said.

His mother turned away from him and didn't say another word.

It took him a while to realize that she was as angry as he'd ever seen her. He finally made his way over to her and said, "I'm sorry."

She turned to him and asked, "What are you sorry for?"

"I'm sorry I took a bath in mud."

"Are you sorry for anything else?" she said.

He thought about it. He couldn't think of anything else he'd done.

"Are you sorry you lied to me about it?"

Oh. Except that.

"Yes," he said, very softly.

"Mud will dry – eventually – and come away from your feathers," said his mother seriously. "It's a foolish thing to do, but it's a temporary thing, and it's just on the surface. Lying, however, comes from the heart. That changes you into something different than what I expect. I wasn't happy that you'd taken a mud bath, but it broke my heart to hear you lie."

"I won't do it again," he told her.

"Good," she replied. "We all do foolish things. We do not need to lie about them."

I would guess that more than a few parents and children recognize themselves in that story. I would guess that more than a few similar conversations of that kind have happened between children, parents, teachers, and other important adults in their lives. Mistakes happen. Missteps happen. Deliberately playing in the mud when you know you're not supposed to – that's not precisely a mistake or a misstep but can be solved with an appropriate amount of soap and water. Lying, however...

There's a reason why "bearing false witness" is one of the Ten Commandments. It harms people's relationships. A lie is an explicit declaration that my comfort means more than my relationship with you. A lie means that you may know less than you need to know in order to make plans that include me. A lie means that you might know less than you need to know about the world – and that can be dangerous.

Thank about all the lies that have been told about COVID-19: that it isn't dangerous, that it can be treated with this, that, or the other medication, that the vaccines are more dangerous than the disease, that personal freedom is more important than public health. All of these are lies, and all of them have done harm.

The drugs touted by some as treatments? They were treatments for other diseases, notably lupus. I have friends with that condition who suddenly couldn't get their medication because the supply had gone to treat COVID patients. Medications that could have helped some people went to people that they didn't help.

And now people are taking a drug for de-worming horses. In the name of humanity, why? Why tell these lies? Why repeat them? Why?

I signed a letter this past week along with ninety-four other Christian clergy around Hawai'i urging eligible people to get vaccinated for COVID-19 as soon as possible. New cases continue to rise. Deaths are starting to rise. Our hospital's ICU is full. Worldwide nearly four and a half million people have died. How many died because of the lies?

We'll never know.

In this encounter with scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem – that means the best respected, most learned, and most powerful of them – Jesus got seriously bent out of shape. They had observed that some of Jesus' followers didn't wash their hands before they ate. That wasn't an expression of politeness, nor was a practice of good health. It was a matter of ritual and spiritual purity, an action that reminded faithful Jews of God's presence as they prepared for a meal. Think of it as an active way of saying grace. Mark was mistaken here – not all first century Jews washed their hands before every meal – but it was common among the most pious and most observant. These religious authorities would have expected Jesus to lead his followers to do the same.

Did he? I don't know. Jesus didn't answer the question. He got angry about it. It appears that there was a practice among some of the wealthy and pious to designate some significant portion of their property as gifts to God. It sounds generous, and it was – but some of them then went to their parents and said, the portion of my wealth that I would have used to support you? I gave that to God. So... sorry. You don't get my help.

That's what got Jesus upset.

Washing hands was innocuous and pious, but its omission wasn't going to harm anyone – at least, that's what they believed not knowing about transmission of germs. Not supporting your parents, though: that's direct harm, and harm in violation of one of the Ten Commandments. Worse: this kind of piety walks right into self-interest, doesn't it? "I give to God, God favors me." That's the logic, if not necessarily the spiritual reality, right? It's pretty much taking God's name in vain, which is another one of the Ten Commandments.

And finally, it's a fraud, because the gift given to God didn't belong to them in the first place. It was what was due to their parents. Their purported generosity came at someone else's expense. Bearing false witness. And theft.

One practice that can, if you think about it, be foreign to the letter or the spirit of four of the Ten Commandments. I almost have to admire the sheer gall of it.

And it was done in the name of pious devotion to God.

"How often does the church pursue her own desires even at the expense of performing and participating in God's will?" writes Cheryl Lindsay at ucc.org. "How many of our faith communities have established our own set of purity codes, written or unwritten, that define what it requires to be accepted and acceptable in God's gathered community? Why is it that so many people think they have to 'get themselves together' before they would be welcomed in God's house? How many people hide the fullness of who their Creator crafted them to be because the people that greet them at the door retract God's extravagant welcome?"

How many faith communities have declared gathering during a pandemic to be a declaration of faith? How many have forbidden masking and embraced group singing as an expression of devotion? How many preachers have denounced vaccines because Christians should rely only on God?

I don't know. Too many. And people have died because of it.

That's what Jesus meant when he said that what comes out of a person is what defiles. He meant that our very expressions of faith can and do cause spiritual injury, moral erosion, and physical death. A piety that is true to God is one that furthers the life of people around. A piety that is true to God is one that honors God in God's creatures. As Karoline Lewis writes at Working Preacher, "This is a 'come to Jesus' text, if you will. That is, if you expect to follow

Jesus, then this will demand an excruciating examination of yourself, your true intentions, your true beliefs, and on what you stake your relationship with God.”

Let your devotion be sound within and without. Let your devotion celebrate God, God’s people, and God’s world.

Amen.