

Luke 17:11-19 “The Cootie Contagion” --

You ever wonder how long cooties have been around? Yup ... you heard me right. I said, “cooties.” I heard my kids talking about cooties when they started school back in Virginia, so clearly they’ve been around since at least the late 90s and 2000s. I knew about cooties as a kid. My neighbor and friend Veronica educated me on the subject. More on that later. So that means cooties have been around since the early 1970s. My Mom and Dad knew about them too, and I know they’ve been around since the late 1930s and 40s. Anybody here want to confirm that they’ve been around longer than that? So yeah ... it would be interesting to see how far they go back. See, I think they’ve been around since before recorded history. A little research showed me that the word comes from the Malaysian/Maori word “kutu” which refers to a parasitic biting insect. But I don’t think that’s what most people mean when they say, “cooties.” So I guess what I’m saying is that I don’t *really* know what cooties are, but I’m very sure I know the effective results of cooties. I know that for generations of children, they have been a clear and present danger even though you can’t see them. Here’s what I do know about them based on what my friend Veronica taught me, and what I have learned in subsequent years from others including my own children. Call them, “cootie characteristics.”

1.) Cooties are *highly* contagious. 2.) Little boys think that only girls have them, and little girls think that only boys have them. 3.) The presence of cooties renders one “unclean” much in the same way, I suppose, as the lepers in today’s scriptures lesson did in Jesus’ time. I was delighted to hear from Veronica that I, in fact, did not have cooties, nor did she, but I needed to be careful ... especially with the company I’d been keeping lately. 4.) Cooties are most certainly transferred by touch, but there’s also a high likelihood that they’re transferred by proximity too. 5.) The most effective way to prevent cooties from being transferred is to simply avoid touching or coming into close proximity with a person who has them. It’s important that you avoid contact with those who have, or *may* have cooties. It’s also helpful to *inform* others

about the infected so that they too can avoid contact. Better still, it's useful to set up *rules* and *social constructs* to make sure the infected stay "in their place." Does this sound about right? Does it sound like I have a good handle on cooties? Cool.

Now ... I *know* this sounds like a silly conversation to be having in church ... especially in a tradition that values education as much as we Disciples do. "Cooties aren't real Jesse! Everyone figures that out by fourth grade!" You have self-proclaimed Theology Nerd Tripp Fuller to thank for why we're talking about this subject in church though. Tripp gives an example of what not to do when your pre-school or grade-school age kids bring up the subject of cooties. See, rather than just flat-out telling his kids, "There are no such thing as cooties," like most responsible parents would do, he went into this elaborate discourse on how we can achieve immunity from cooties by eating magic pretzel sticks and sharing those pretzel sticks with others. Yeah, that one backfired on him on so many levels and it ended up creating this complicated matrix of ... weirdness that generated a whole lot more questions than it answered. So when someone called him on it and asked him *why* he came up with such a hare-brained idea in the first place he said, "Because *it doesn't matter* whether cooties exist or not ... *if they define the terms of engagement on the playground, then they are real.*" This is what happens when religion and philosophy types are allowed to raise children unsupervised.

But, sad to say, I get what he's saying. Cooties may not *exist*, but they are *real*. *Who* makes them real? The ones under the threat of contagion of course. How does this tie into our scripture, you might ask? Consider this: When Jesus healed the ten lepers on his way to Jerusalem, it was the Samaritan who praised God, came back, and thanked Jesus for healing him. Remember that the Samaritans were considered "trash" by the "good" God-fearing Jews who practiced temple-centered worship. The Samaritans represented the country-folk who remained behind after the Babylonians destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and sent all the "movers and shakers" back to Babylon. The

Samaritans didn't have a temple for seventy-plus years, so they made adjustments in the way they practiced their faith. So when King Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonians and sent the Jewish exiles back to Israel to re-build the temple, guess who didn't want to go back to business as usual? Those country folks who lived up in Samaria! "Nah, we're good. We've adapted. We've learned to live without a temple. We figured out that God is everywhere and doesn't need a temple." How do you suppose that went over with the mainstream, cultured, temple-centered majority of Jews who lived in the more "civilized" regions of Israel? Not very well I'm afraid. The Samaritans' unwillingness to go back to the way things used to be gave them cooties. And yet on several occasions in the Gospels, we see that not only does Jesus not care that the Samaritans were considered to be infested with cooties, he actually lifted them up as examples of those who "got it." Who understood what it meant to live one's faith. Who walked the walk.

Cooties, even though they don't exist, are real because they are given the power to separate, judge, shun, and shame others. They are used to create barriers that prevent people from enjoying all that the playground has to offer. "I'm sorry, but you can't play on the monkey bars. Why? Because only people who don't have cooties can play on the monkey bars. And you, sadly, have cooties and thus cannot play on the monkey bars. Too bad, so sad ... run along and go play in the dirt or something. Just keep your cooties to yourself." Well, don't we just outgrow this notion that some people have cooties when we get older? I'm not sure about that. Do we, as adults, ever separate, judge, shame, and shun people and prevent them from enjoying all that life has to offer? Well okay, but not in the *church*, right? I'm afraid history paints a much different picture. In fact, sometimes the church is the very *worst example* of our insistence that cooties are real. And remember, they *are* real, even though they don't exist.

See, we know who has cooties. We know who to ignore, we know who to avoid, and we know who to shun. Even though we leave the literal

playground when we move on from grade school to youth to adulthood, the metaphorical playground remains throughout our lives. And here's where I think I get what Tripp Fuller was trying to do when he came up with the whole magic pretzel things that apparently messed his kids up ... I can sort of get my head wrapped around what he was trying to do. See, we *all* have cooties. We all have cooties, and they are *very* real. And we know it too. Even though we want to act like it's all about those "other" people who have cooties, we know we've got them. We know what makes us different from others. Sometimes our "cooties" are about the guilt we bear about different things in our lives. Sometimes it's about secrets we hide ... abuse or addiction or other things that are stored away in the dark little cubby holes that we keep hidden away. Sometimes it's about burdens that we carry that are not of our own making ... family of origin issues or our place on the rungs of our culture's "social ladder." Cooties can be dangerous too, especially in the ways in which we let this imaginary affliction rule over us.

Here's the cure though. Here's the "magic pretzel stick" if you will. The "cure" for cooties is to understand that when we enter into relationship with God through Christ, we become new creations. That's when we *really* come to the realization that cooties (real or imagined) have no power over us.

Some of the books I read this summer focused on Jesus' healing ministry and how it was at the very heart of almost everything he did. Tripp Fuller, as he defended his choice not to tell his kids that cooties don't exist, called Jesus the "cootie collector." Through his healing ministry, Jesus collected all the cooties from every playground across Judea, all the while proclaiming that they didn't exist ... that they were just fabrications we humans invented to divide and separate us from God and each other. Jesus collected these cooties from those ten lepers as well as the sick, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the religious leaders and zealots, the fishermen, the kids, the rich, the poor ... even his closest disciples. In fact he managed to stir things up in so many playgrounds that the "bullies" who used cooties to keep the status quo and to keep

people enslaved conspired to kill him. And they succeeded too. What the bullies didn't take into account was that he'd return from the dead! But now instead of just *one* person proclaiming that cooties no longer have power over anyone, now there were *legions* of people spreading this good news!

I sure hope Tripp's kids remember this illustration when they grow in their faith. I hope that when they graduate from the playground at school to the *world's* "playground," they understand that through God's work in Christ, the rumors, lies, guilt, shame, and fragmented parts of ourselves don't have the last word over us. The good news of Christ is that *everyone* has access to all that life has to offer.