

Epiphany 6
Year B
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2 Kings 5:1-14
Mark 1:40-45

When I was in grade school my parents sent me to numerous camps that were run by male Catholic Missionary Orders. I remember clearly being at one such summer experience and watching a film about Fr. Columbo, a missionary priest from America serving somewhere in Africa. He lived and worked in a leper colony for 30 years, ministering to the resident's physical and spiritual needs until he himself contracted the disease and eventually died.

I remember not knowing what leprosy was and asking a lot of questions about it. I was told by my parents that we should always stay away from people with those kinds of diseases because we might catch it ourselves. This instilled a healthy fear in me and I decided at that early age not to have any contact with people who had leprosy and I believed that everyone must have felt that way.

Well, all of these old thoughts came back to me as I read the first reading and the gospel for today. In the Old Testament lesson we hear about Naaman the commander of the army of Aram. He was a great and mighty warrior, but he had leprosy.

His Israelite slave girl told him of the prophet Elisha who could cure him of this disease. Naaman obtained permission, money and a letter of introduction from his king to go to Israel and be cured. The king of Israel was distraught by this because he thought he was being set up to something he couldn't do—cure disease, and if he failed he would suffer the consequences from a mighty nation.

Even though Naaman went straight to the top—the king of Israel, he was referred instead to the prophet Elisha. Naaman was angered when Elisha wouldn't come out to meet him and work his magic to cure the leprosy. Naaman was used to the best in life and expected everything to be handed to him because of his position.

He was obviously insulted when Elisha sent a messenger who told him to do something he wasn't expecting. Naaman was angry and wasn't going to follow the instructions given him. He was prepared to head back home without obtaining what he sought just because it didn't happen the way he wanted it to. He was pouting, but his servants called him on this behavior and he relented. Because Naaman changed his expectations and behavior, he was cured.

In the Gospel, we are told that a leper came to Jesus and knelt before him believing that Jesus had the power and authority to cure him if he chose to. We do not know what the

status of this leper was or anything about him. But he came in humility and faith asking Jesus to cure him and he didn't care how it happened.

At this request, Jesus was moved with pity and responds with deep feeling and compassion. Jesus touched the leper, thereby affirming his shared humanity and incurring ritual defilement on himself. For the sake of this suffering man, Jesus chose to violate the ritual laws and compromise his status.

What laws, customs or norms are we ready to violate in order to help someone who is suffering, outcast and excluded? On the flip side, what forces are keeping us from acting compassionately or meeting people where they are? What is required of us? Are we willing to do them?

Jesus' command that the healed man show himself to the priest complies with the requirements of Leviticus where a person who has leprosy has to show himself to the priest for a judgment before he can re-enter Jewish life without restrictions. These same codes state that a person with leprosy shall wear torn clothes and have disheveled hair and shall live alone in a dwelling outside the camp and cry out "Unclean, unclean" so that others will avoid them. For contact with these lepers rendered a person unclean as well.

Leprosy at this point in time included a wide variety of skin disorders and was frequently regarded as punishment for sin. The stigma attached to this disease is seen as a judgment from God.

Leprosy was the most dreaded of all diseases because it separated people from family and community and thus constituted a living death. Rabbinic sayings compare the cure of leprosy to raising the dead.

In the case of Naaman, however, leprosy is treated differently than it was within the Jewish community. Even though Naaman had leprosy, he still held a position of power and prestige and was not disconnected from his family. Isn't it interesting how different cultures treat diseases and the people who are afflicted by them? Maybe our various societies, even if we are enemies, have something to learn from each other.

Another interesting note is how these two different lepers approached healing from the divine. Arrogance by one and humility by the other did not stop the healing love of God from acting in their lives.

Community, healing and right relationship with God is important to Jesus. We see over and over again that if individuals are disconnected in any of these areas how Jesus sought to reconcile these relationships.

What are some of the things that cut us off from our community of faith or that keep us separated from God? How do we approach Jesus in our time of need? Do we follow in the footsteps of Naaman, or the unnamed leper? Might we even take a different tack in coming before God for forgiveness, healing or petition?

The important thing to remember is that God hears all of our prayers no matter what our attitude is. The reality, however, is that our prayers are answered in different ways, just as the prayers of the two lepers were addressed differently.

Then the question becomes, how do we act after our requests are addressed? We are not told what Naaman did, but the other leper went around telling everyone of his cure even though Jesus told him not to say anything. It seems that this former leper often gets cast in a negative light for doing this, but how could this cured man do anything less?

Are we willing to boldly proclaim the greatness of God to others when God answers our prayers? Are we as thankful or do we go away resentful that God didn't respond to us in the way that we wanted?

I am reminded that leprosy has also served another function in our world. I am not the only one who was ever taught to despise and fear people with leprosy.

Throughout history humans have been ostracized and excluded for many reasons, leprosy is just one of many. But we read of many "saintly" people throughout time who have been converted to God and how they deepened this relationship through the outcast lepers of their day.

One such example is St. Francis of Assisi. As he was moving away from his former life, he was compelled one day to embrace and kiss a leper whom he was passing by. This action triggered something within Francis and his life took on new meaning.

If the truth be told, I have never met anyone with leprosy. But I have learned over the years that if I take a risk to accept and connect with any person who is socially ostracized or excluded, that I am changed by the experience.

Who are these lepers in our day? Do I know anyone that might be considered an outcast, an unclean person, who is disconnected from God, from family and from society?

How can I, how can we, embrace the leprosy among us and within us so that we might be in deeper relationship with God, ourselves and our neighbors?

AMEN.