

“A Leper’s Prayer”

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6th Sunday of Epiphany-February 12, 2012

First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN

FIRST READING: Leviticus 13:1-2; 44-46

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: 2 When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests.

[If] 44 he is leprous, he is unclean. The priest shall pronounce him unclean; the disease is on his head. 45 The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." 46 He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

SECOND READING: Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" 42 Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 44 saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." 45 But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

I doubt that any of us here today can possibly imagine the sheer terror that the word, “leprosy,” had for people in the times we are reading about today.

But we get a strong sense of that terror every single time we read about in the Bible.

Leviticus, for example, is an exacting book, full of some very strict laws with very severe penalties.

But in a book noted for its stringent guidelines, the laws about leprosy take up not one, but two full chapters: Leviticus 13 and 14. And there is no gray area here—only black and white. Either you have leprosy or you don’t. And once you have been identified as a leper, either you have completely and totally recovered from it, or you are a leper for good. Until you die. There is no middle ground. No mercy allowed.

Indeed the hammer blows just keep falling on anyone with leprosy.

Because first and foremost, lepers were the most vivid symbol and sign of sin and death at work among human beings.

Once identified, more than diagnosed, as having leprosy, lepers are to go about with their hair wild and unkempt and their clothes torn, both signs of mourning and continual, unending grief. There is no cure for leprosy, even today. But in those days, the fear that leprosy would spread and affect others was rampant. And so being a leper was a death sentence.

And not just a death sentence of biology, as dying from a horrible disease.

Leprosy in the Hebrew Scriptures is a sign of God’s actions. God uses leprosy as a warning or a direct sign of God’s punishment.

You will remember the first we meet leprosy in the Bible. It is in response to Moses’ question of how he can possibly expect to convince a hard-bitten, hard-hearted, hard-headed tyrant like Pharaoh that he (Moses) and Aaron are anything more than lunatics.

In reply, God said to Moses, “Put your hand in your cloak and draw it out.” And when Moses did, his hand was leprous. And then God told Moses to put his hand back into his cloak and draw it out, and when he did it the second time, his hand was perfectly whole.

That is a sign to us that leprosy would have been enough to make even the most brazen and “in love with his own power” person sit up and take notice. Leprosy is just no joking matter. It frightens even the most powerful human beings.

In fact, in the Naaman story, that is precisely how the king of Israel reacts when he reads the letter from the king of Aram (Syria) in which he asks that Naaman, the most mighty warrior of that day, be healed of his leprosy:

“When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?”

Leprosy is simply beyond all human control. Leviticus 14 puts it in heavy and unmistakable terms: “The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron saying: When you come into the land of Canaan, and I put a leprous disease in a house...”

Leprosy is God’s domain, totally beyond all human healing, power or denial.

No human being can lift it from anyone. No human should even touch a leper. Or have anything to do with one.

So, when Leviticus says that “the priest shall pronounce the leper unclean...the disease is on his own head,” and that “he shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease, he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”—when it says that, it is the crushing of all human hope.

If you can imagine for a moment on any given Sunday that when we mention our prayer concerns, that someone is sick, then imagine that as a pastor I would then have to turn to that person and tell them to get up right then and there, and get out of here. And that we will never have anything to do with them ever again.

And not only must they get out of this church, but they must abandon their homes, leave their families and get out of town, to go live in whatever area they can find where no one else can see them or stumble across them.

And the second that they see another human being, they must immediately stand up and shout out, “Unclean, unclean,” as a warning to avoid even a passing sight of them.

You may remember that Miriam was struck with leprosy when she rebelled against Moses.

And that King Uzziah was struck with leprosy in the temple, when he charged in to try to force the priests to put God’s name and the worship of God behind his own political agenda.

And even though he was king, he had to live alone from then on, in a house that no one else touched.

Because leprosy is a sign of rebellion against God, of God’s punishment.

Leprosy, in fact, was to put on death row. And such a death.

For the body literally melts and falls apart, leaving a specter of horror behind.

And so we can see why it was pretty hard not to think of any leper as the worst kind of sinner, under God’s own mandate to suffer the worst punishment possible: divine and human rejection and a horrible death all alone. Even if one happened to be cured of the disease, or somehow recover—obviously requiring God’s direct action—there were extensive and expensive sacrifices required to make atonement and be readmitted to the community after the cure.

But cures? Really, how often did that happen?

And meanwhile, any priest or God-fearing Jew was absolutely bound to enforce the laws to have nothing to do with them. Because the whole point of the Levitical laws was to protect the community and its health, even at the cost of all hope, human contact and empathy toward a leper.

As Leviticus 13: 44 says, “The disease is on his own head,” and that is the end of the story.

So, by *all* expectations, what we read in Mark’s Gospel today is *not at all* what we would expect to read.

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling, he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean."

It is a conversation itself that, by all expectations, should have never taken place. The leper was never to approach anyone. As a Jewish leader under the Law, Jesus was never to allow such contact, unless it was to examine him to see if he was already cured. Otherwise, he should have immediately sent him away.

But for a moment, if we are willing to entertain at all the idea of a leper praying to God for healing, then I think we could at least expect certain questions to be asked. After all, this is leprosy, and a leper, we are talking about. And surely we need to be careful.

At least as a pastor, I can think of several questions I think I would probably want to ask.

So I have gone ahead and actually developed here a little “prayer request” form that I might take to session one day for approval and to have on hand, just in case, we have a replay of this event from the life of Jesus.

Question 1: Describe how you came to be a leper. Be specific, please.

That seems only fair, don't you think? We have the whole community to look out for.

Question 2: What sins are you ready to confess as a condition for being healed?

I think that one is pretty obvious. No one wants to be hasty with forgiveness.

Question 3: What evidence can you give us that you believe God is ready to forgive your sins?

It is clearly a serious thing to think about removing a divine curse without God's permission.

Question 4: Of all the lepers in the world, why should your request be approved?

It is a matter of making sure that forgiveness doesn't lower the standards of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Question 5: Are you prepared to keep all our conversations confidential?

This is only obvious and practical, because you can imagine how many other lepers would come flooding in here if they hear that you have been healed.

Question 6: What are you planning to do with your new-found health, if your request for healing is approved?

One would not want to waste a healing.

Yes, I would ask these questions, and there is one main reason why. It is not, I must confess, because I am trying to be careful for God.

It is because lepers frighten me. People's problems frighten me. They overwhelm me, or I think they will, so I try to distance myself and protect myself with fences between me and people with their problems.

But with Jesus...there are no questions. None. None at all.

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!"

Jesus did everything we...well, at least I...don't expect.

He did everything wrong in the eyes of the Pharisees and the publicans. He put mercy over righteousness. He had mercy on a person condemned by the law. He touched the man.

And he healed him without proper warrant.

Which, of course, is what Jesus did all the time. He healed people, sinners even. He forgave people, without their saying a word most times. Those actions themselves angered and terrified people. Was Jesus just turning evil loose, letting people off scot-free? Doesn't he realize that “the rest of us” have to live with these people? And if they did it once...they will probably do it again?

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus has just been casting out demons, more words that completely overwhelm me. The very language of “demon possession” is surely a sign of people throwing up their hands in utter despair to say, “I don't know what is wrong with him. Nothing we try works. It is just beyond our comprehension how anyone can be this messed up. He must be possessed by pure evil, by a demon.”

But it's my opinion, that as bad as demon-possession was, the saving grace for demoniacs was that they seem to have been considered people paying the price for...stupidity. You play with fire, you get burned. You poke a snake, it may bite you. Demon-possessed people were people who may have just been too naïve or too self-confident for their own good. They did dumb things, and they got eaten by them. But by comparison, lepers were worse.

So that, we can find evidence that there were people who claimed to be exorcists in the ancient world. People still felt that demon-possession could be turned around. But no one, but no one, would go out to hang up a shingle to cure leprosy. It would be like trying to cure blindness or

paralysis. But surely lepers, of all people, deserve their punishment. Because leprosy is a sign that God is truly displeased.

And so, in these few words: “Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him,” it is all the more clear that here in this moment, the world has changed.

And thank God, it has changed forever.

Because if a leper’s prayer can be heard, and if a leper can receive mercy, then the Kingdom of God has indeed arrived for all of us, and there is Good News indeed.

This is the Gospel in pictures, in art. This story is a living picture of why the church doesn’t have to tell people to pack up and leave because they are revealed to sinners.

It is why the church can open its doors to the world around us.

It is why we live by faith, not by law. By Grace and not by works of righteousness.

It is all because of one reason, and one reason alone. And it is this: There is a power at work in Jesus Christ that is greater than all the power of death and hell, greater than all the sins and fears of the whole world, greater than all the powers of all the demons of all times in all the universe.

In Jesus Christ, God is present. And God’s mercy and God’s power are more than all the forces of hell can withstand. They must fall back in terror themselves, for God is reclaiming what has been lost, saving what is dying, redeeming what is under a curse and sentence of death and rejection.

And thanks be to God, I am a pastor and not a priest, not in the sense of a priest under the Law. I am privileged to seek and pray for all, lepers and blind and sinners, because God’s power of healing and salvation is here!

And we live in the grace and the mercy of Jesus Christ, who knows our sins, and knows just how evil and wrong it is, but whose power of new life is greater than all powers that oppose it. God’s claim on human beings is greater than the grip of evil on us, despite how very real leprosy and a leper are right before our eyes.

Jesus and his amazing mercy are the reason, the only reason, why I don’t have to point at you or anyone else who yearns for God’s mercy and say, “Get up and get out of here, leave our presence and never return, go live alone with your sins on your own head.”

It is why I can say, “Jesus Christ has come to seek and to save sinners.”

Jesus heals this leper, this human being, on a single prayer. A simple plea of faith for mercy. And Jesus heals him. He asks no questions. It is pure grace.

Jesus even knows, no doubt, that this man is about to fail again and create even more problems for Jesus once Jesus heals him. He doesn’t do what Jesus says do. So I think we can call him ungrateful, or at least insensitive. The man is not perfect, even after being healed and accepted.

But still Jesus shows him mercy. Jesus is the reason we no longer call leprosy a curse from God. He has emptied it of its curse and power by his saving word and touch.

And that is why we call it now a disease. It is why the church, despite all our fears, has led the world in serving and caring for and now finally healing lepers.

Hear the Good News, my friends.

Jesus Christ has come into the world, God among us, in human flesh.

The power at work in him is greater than all our fears, all our sins and all the evils of the forces of sin, death and hell.

Pray! Ask for God’s mercy. Long for it. Trust it. Reach out to Jesus, if it is just to whisper a prayer of mercy or touch the hem of his garment.

He wills the salvation, chooses the salvation of the most discouraged and downcast, the outcast and those who call themselves hopeless, but long for hope. God has come near to us. We now all can draw near to God.

Spread the word, to lepers of every sort, throughout the entire world. The prayers of lepers are heard by the Lord of All Creation, and they, we, find mercy in the touch of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.