

Touching the Untouchables

A Sermon by the Rev. Brian Coleman

Sunday, February 14, 2009

Leprosy in Ancient Israel was not the same as what we call Hansen's disease today. In Leviticus, the Law prescribes that lepers: people with any number of skin disorders including rashes, acne, eczema, psoriasis, and other forms of dermatitis, must rend their clothes, bare their heads, cover their upper lip and call out "Unclean! Unclean!" as they made their way through towns and villages. Leprosy was understood to be divine punishment for sin, but was not thought to be an incurable disease. Furthermore, it was not limited to people – buildings and clothes could also become leprous.

Those who had been diagnosed as lepers by the priest were required to separate themselves from the community. This was not for medical but religious reasons. Lepers were treated not as sick, but as ritually unclean. The primary concern with respect to a leper was not the spread of disease, but the spread of impurity through the community. The priest alone could diagnose the disease, though he had no technique for curing it; and he alone determined whether or not the afflicted person had been "cleansed".

It was Judaism's concept of wholeness that led to leprosy being equated with impurity. The general idea was that every individual should be a complete and self-contained specimen of its own kind, and that there should be no mixing of kinds. Lepers were incomplete because they exhibited the mixing of two colors of skin. This was taboo, as was plowing with two kinds of beasts, raising two kinds of grain in the same field, weaving two kinds of thread into one piece of cloth, or crossbreeding two kinds of cattle. As ridiculous as it sounds, those covered completely with the disease, so that they had only one color of skin, were allowed to return to the community, because they were no longer unclean. Once they began to heal, however, they were reclassified and isolated again.

The required sacrifice for a healed leper was to offer to the priest two clean birds, one of which was slaughtered and the blood mixed with spring water. Taking the live bird, a piece of cedar, a sprig of hyssop and a length of red yarn, the priest dipped the bundle in the blood and water and sprinkled the man seven times to purify him. The live bird was then set free. The person then had to wash his clothes and shave off all his hair. Then for seven days he lived outside his home, until the seventh day when he washed his body, his clothes and shaved again.

On the eighth day he offered the following sacrifices: a male lamb as a guilt offering, a ewe as a sin offering, and another male lamb as a holocaust, plus a cereal offering (flour mixed with oil), and another measure of oil, about a pint. With the blood from the lamb the priest anointed the person's right ear, thumb, and big toe, and did the same with the oil, and then put some more of the oil on the person's head. Only then was the person fully cleansed.

Talk about the cure being worse than the disease!

This purity ritual had to do with an ancient notion that skin diseases were the result of possession by a winged evil spirit. The use of red yarn and blood were thought to frighten off such spirits, and the release of the live bird indicated the departure of the demon from the affected person. The other offerings were meant to bring the outcast back into the community by appeasing God's wrath.

That being said, the story of the healing of the leper from today's Gospel takes on a whole new light. The

leper says that Jesus can make him clean, when according to Jewish Law, only the priest has such authority. By healing the leper and pronouncing him clean, Jesus is usurping the role of the temple priests who were the sole practitioners of such ministry. They alone had the authority to communicate God's healing grace and to grant readmission to the community.

This is why the religious authorities of his day are so concerned about Jesus actions. He is constantly overstepping the bounds by healing the sick, casting out unclean spirits, and forgiving sin.

The actions of Jesus threatened the uniqueness of their claims to righteousness. Jesus focused his ministry primarily on those who were seemingly least worthy of it; those who even by today's standards fall short of the mark. Holy people weren't supposed to associate with sinners. They couldn't afford to risk getting their hands dirty. Jesus, on the other hand, risked getting dirty, being tarred with the same brush, getting infected through his interaction with sinners. He understood that God's chief desire was mercy, which for him required sacrifice. He rolled up his sleeves and entered into the condition of those he ministered to.

Note the contrast between Elisha's interaction with the leper Naaman, and Jesus' exchange with the leper in the Gospel. Elisha doesn't even come out to meet Naaman, but sends instructions through his servant Gehazi. Jesus reaches out and touches the leper kneeling before him, risking the very disease he seeks to heal.

In the Cathedral Centre of Diocese of Los Angeles, there hangs a rather strange and grotesque portrait of a man who understood this sacrifice of mercy better than most. He was known as Fr. Damien - Apostle to the Lepers.

He was born in Belgium on 3 January 1840. His father sent him to college to prepare for a commercial profession; but as a result of a mission given by the Redemptorists, a religious order, he decided to become a monk. He entered the noviciate of the Fathers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary at Louvain, and took in religion the name of Damien. He was admitted to the religious profession, 7 Oct. 1860.

Three years later he was sent on a mission to the Hawaiian Islands, where he was ordained priest and later given charge of various districts on the islands of Hawaii and Molokai.

On the island of Molokai there had been established a leper colony where the Government quarantined all persons afflicted with the disease. The board of health supplied the sick with food and clothing, but was unable to provide either resident physicians or nurses.

In 1873, Father Damien, at his own request and with the blessing of his bishop, arrived at the settlement as parish priest. There were already 600 lepers at the time. The superintendent of the board of health wrote to the bishop, "As long as the lepers can care for themselves they are comparatively comfortable, but as soon as the dreadful disease renders them helpless, it would seem that even demons themselves would pity their condition and hasten their death."

For a long time Father Damien was the only one to bring them the comfort they so greatly needed. He not only administered the sacraments of the church, but also gave what little medical service and bodily comforts he was capable of. He dressed their ulcers, helped them erect their cottages, and went so far as to dig their graves and make their coffins. After twelve years of this heroic service he discovered in himself the first signs of the disease. Despite his own illness he continued his mission, assisted by two other priests and two lay brothers.

On 28 March, 1889, Father Damien became completely incapacitated and died two weeks later.

The message of Fr. Damien's life, and of Jesus' interaction with the leper, and all the other untouchables whom he encountered is clear: mercy trumps righteousness every time. Our role as followers of this messy Messiah is to enter into the world with all its uncleanness and impurity; to reach out and touch the lives of those who are oppressed and downtrodden, and when they grab hold of our outstretched hands, not to recoil in disgust but to match their desperate grip with the courage of our convictions and draw them up into the healing grace of God's redeeming love.

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