

Touched by Jesus

E6-12, Feb. 12, 2012
Mk. 1:40-45

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Memorial, Afton

The law of the Lord as given to Moses, Leviticus 13, beginning at verse 1:

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron,

*“When a man 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,
then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests,
and the priest shall examine the diseased spot on the skin of his body;
and if the hair in the diseased spot has turned white
and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body,*

it is a leprous disease; when the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him unclean.

In 1983, I served the Lutheran church as a lay missionary in Senegal, a country in western Africa.

As a missionary in Africa, I received no salary, but was given a small stipend for food.

I lived not in the isolated conclaves of the wealthy,

but among the common, poor people of rural Africa.

I bought each day’s food at open markets.

Open air markets were bustling places for socializing and shopping.

They were centers of community and convergence of humanity.

Among the throng, threaded many *beggars*:

children sent by parents to glean enough for the day’s meal,
crippled men propelling themselves by knuckles on fabricated carts,
old women left widowed and homeless—and—
lepers with no means of employment.

I would see men who were once healthy and strong,

able-bodied husbands and fathers who once proudly provided for their families,
now reduced to dirty rags, sitting in the street’s dust,
begging for a few coins to buy a little bread.

I saw people missing ears and toes, with fingerless hands held out to receive my charity.

This was 1983, only three decades ago, lepers begged me for food.

In 1991, the 44th World Health Assembly (WHA) passed a resolution

to eliminate leprosy as a public health problem by the year 2000.

Existing treatments are effective,

and the disease has been greatly reduced.

However, persistent obstacles to the elimination of the disease remain,

including fighting social taboos about a disease

for which patients have historically been considered "unclean"
or "cursed by God" and made outcasts.

The law of the Lord as given to Moses, Numbers, chapter 5, beginning at verse 1:

The Lord said to Moses,

*“Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp every leper,
and every one having a discharge,
and every one that is unclean through contact with the dead;
you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp,
that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell.”*

Lepers and anyone with contagious disease are to be quarantined,

separated out, banned from the community,

so as to not infect the rest.

They are cut off from society,

separated from family and friends, from spouses, isolated and alone.

Children torn from parents,

families broken apart, so as to spare the rest.

There was no other way to protect the towns.

To save the rest, they banish a few.

But it is in community where God resides.

God's Spirit abides in communities of people
who live for and care for one another.

And so, lepers not only are isolated from people,
but are banished from God!

Leprosy and contagious diseases were threats to community.

Diseases could decimate entire towns—and often did as plagues.

Diseases were greater threats to the survival of whole villages
than any army or natural disaster.

Containing disease was essential

for the survival, stability and well-being of community.

In ancient times there was no medicine as we know it.

There were no doctors practicing healing.

Instead, *priests* were responsible for holding together community,

and protecting the community from disease was one of their functions.

Priests had limited technology for disease prevention,

they could have people wash with clear water,

or they could banish persistent, incurable cases.

Diagnosis was primitive.

Leprosy was a generic term that included many types of skin diseases

including psoriasis, ringworm and vitiligo.

The priest was responsible for determining

whether the disease was contagious or curable.

If someone was determined to be contagious, then,

according to God's law in Leviticus 13 (verse 45-46),

The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes

and let the hair of his head hang loose,

and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, "Unclean, unclean."

He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease;

he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.

The leper is banned from human contact, left to haunt the shadows of society.

They are the forgotten ones.

They are the marginalized and impoverished and rejected.

To so much as *touch* such a person risked infecting and contaminating oneself.

But the leper *begged*.

He imposed himself, came up to Jesus, risking contact,

and said, "If you choose, you can make me clean."

Jesus *can* save this man.

Jesus *can* restore his health.

This miserable existence moved Jesus to pity.

More than pity, Jesus was *indignant*.

This tragedy *angered* Jesus.

This man's disease *mocked*

everything God's good and righteous kingdom stood for.

Jesus did the unthinkable,

the illegal according to God's law.

He stretched forth his hand and *touched*.

The only *acceptable* approach is to let the disease take its course,

and if the man was lucky, he would eventually recover from it.

Jesus overstepped acceptable approaches and swept aside luck,

to bring about *immediate resolution* to this wrong that banished the man.

"I *do* choose."

Jesus *does* care.

Jesus *did* act.

And separation *stopped*.
A life was restored and a future given back.

Then Jesus “sternly warned him.”
Our English softens the meaning too much.
Jesus *criticized* him.

The sense is more like *snorting* in indignation.
Jesus spoke *harshly* and *expelled* him in the same way he cast out demons,
not because he was repulsed by the disease,
but because the man wanted *only healing*
and not the message Jesus gave.

The man’s motives were impure.
Yet, Jesus healed *even this one* whose heart was not in the right place.

Jesus tried to get him right;
Jesus sent him to the priest so as to fulfill God’s law.

But the man scorned the gift.
He wanted the blessing, but not *the God* behind the blessing.
And so like demons who would get it wrong if allowed to speak,
the man went out and told everyone of the *miracle* but not the *message*.

Jesus became a spectacle, a curiosity.
He got an *audience*, not a following.
And Jesus instead finds *himself* banished from community
and “could no longer go into a town openly.”

Every generation has its favorite villains,
those rejected and driven out.
My grandparents’ generation was certain that
women’s suffrage would surely destroy western civilization.
The prevailing opinion of the time was that women
did not have the *mental ability* to make proper choices,
and that to give them the power of voting was simply irresponsible.
Well, women have more than proven able to know what’s right
—my wife tells me so.

And my father’s generation’s favored villains were *communists*.
We were told communists were infiltrating every level of America
and were taking over the minds of our children.
Communists were evil incarnate,
raising up an evil empire that surely would take over the world.
It was straight out of science fiction.
Fear of communism became an *epidemic itself*,
turning friends against one another,
wives against husbands,
destroying reputations,
dismantling trust,
disintegrating community.
Untold millions of people were ruined by accusations of being communist.

Americans *today* are rich in our choice of villains.
We have *any number* of people to fear and loathe:
immigrants, Muslims, Hispanics, terrorists, protestors.
Election year politics is rife with villains,
so much so that our election choices seem to be only between the lesser of evils.
We have abandoned common sense
and the weighing of best approaches for a flourishing future.

In this land of plenty
 we choose to pick villains.
 Most disagreements today are over
 who to hate most and fight most and imprison most.

The church has a unique role in civilization.
 The church has a *moral authority*
 that no other sector of society can claim.
 The church is the one entity that has foundation *outside* of itself,
 that is grounded on *the kingdom of God*,
 the righteousness of God.
 We as church have a unique role and a distinctive responsibility
 for holding together community,
 whether it be the community called family,
 or the community of this congregation,
 or the community of Afton, Minnesota,
 or the worldwide community we call humanity.

Memorial Lutheran Church is part of the universal Church
 established by God
 to hold people together,
 to bring people together.
 Here we meet Jesus.
 We are a community where each belong
 not because of our own goodness or rights,
 but because *Jesus* invites.
 Jesus did not particularly *like* the leper in today's Gospel reading.
 He was harsh.
 He did not approve of the leper's motives.
 But Jesus healed him anyway and gave him a chance to follow God.
 The leper chose otherwise.
 Not even Jesus batted a thousand.
 Some people just don't get it.
 But we err on the side of grace.
 We give every opportunity for restoration.

This church is a *holy place* and a *holy people* where we meet God.
 Not everyone here will be pals with everyone else,
 or even particularly *like* everyone.
 Yet, because of *Jesus*, we are community, we are church.
 Because of Jesus,
 we welcome each other,
 bear the burdens of each other,
 encourage each other,
 seek the best for each other,
 care for each other.
 We are a place to experience *Jesus*.
 Jesus is here *among* us.
 Jesus has gathered us.
 Jesus speaks to us.
 Jesus heals us.
 Jesus touches.
 Amen.