

Sermon

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St. John the Evangelist

October 9th, 2016

Proper 23: 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; Psalm 111; 2 Tim 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

When I was a kid, I knew lepers had some skin problem, but because I had never seen the word spelled, only heard it said, I figured they were called “leopards” because their skin ailment caused them to have spots. That’s not the case, obviously. But it’s also not the case the leprosy, when it is mentioned in the Bible, is the same thing as Hansen’s disease which we call leprosy. “Leprosy” in the Bible is kind of a catch-all term for a number of skin ailments, which were somewhat common, since level of sanitation, hygiene and medical treatment were all in their nascent phase.

I’ve not had leprosy, but when I was a teenager I had really bad acne. It’s not uncommon for teenagers to develop this, I know, but mine was severe enough that I had to go on medication to help it. When you’re that age, you’re self-conscious enough about your body, but add to that skin blemishes that you feel like the whole world is fixated on the way you are, and it’s a rough combination. Luckily, after a couple years and some medication it cleared up—more or less—and I could put that time in my rearview mirror as quickly as possible. To this day, I can’t find any pictures of myself from that period.

I’m not sure it would have helped to know that I was not the first person who felt isolated and shamed by my skin. Naaman the great warrior knew what it felt like, as did many people in Jesus’ time—ten of them in today’s Gospel passage alone. If you had one of these skin ailments in ancient times, it was not a happy life. You were ostracized from the community because you were considered unclean. You were kept in the shadows. Alone. Apart. Ashamed. I know acne isn’t leprosy but it certainly had a similar effect on me. I would have given anything for the miracle of a simple cure that these characters were granted.

It probably would have been more helpful for me to know that while some people carry their affliction on their skin, *everyone* carries some sort of affliction in their soul.

One of the sacred privileges of the priesthood is that you are one of the few people who others feel comfortable sharing their afflictions with. And while I couldn’t tell you what each of you is suffering from, I can tell you that everyone has something. Everyone is carrying some burden, deep within themselves that feels like an anchor keeping their soul from taking flight. Something that causes them to feel isolated, sad, and maybe even ashamed.

Does the shadow of grief still cast a cloud across your sunniest days? Does a past injustice still cause your blood to simmer with anger? Do you have a loved one whose suffering you can do nothing to alleviate? Does anxiety rob of your joy? Do you carry the scars of a past trauma that are still too tender to call to mind? Do you have something in your past that, if the world knew, you’re sure they would look at you with eyes of judgment and ridicule?

To someone who has an external affliction, it can seem like an unfair blessing that most people get to keep their ailments hidden out of sight. But the difficulty of spiritual leprosy, is that people struggle to bring those ailments into the light. If you had leprosy, you would go see a doctor—there would be no avoiding it. But when the thing that ails us is not visible, it can be twice as hard to give voice to it, which makes it harder to heal.

This is part of the reason why we have started doing healing prayers on the last Sunday of the month here, in the chapel, during communion. We all need help taking what it is that is weighing down our soul and lifting it up into the light of God's countenance so that we might be healed and restored to fullness of life. Simply whispering it, giving voice to it, can begin that process of casting our burdens upon the Lord.

But sometimes the thing that is stopping us from voicing our inner afflictions is believing that Jesus actually can heal us of our infirmities at all. We all have stories of praying for a loved one who died before their time and the anger and betrayal that we feel when those prayers seem to go unheeded. Where is the miraculous healing that was happening all over the place back when Jesus was walking down the street?

I worked as a hospital chaplain for a summer in preparation for the priesthood. I worked mostly on an inpatient oncology floor. In just three months, I lost count of how many of my patients died. It was a humbling experience, the most formative of all my classes and training and the most difficult. Understandably, we did a lot of praying for healing in those rooms. And most of those prayers went unheeded if our measure of a prayer's success was someone not dying.

But what if that's not the right way to measure healing? What if healing goes deeper than the biological level? Sure, over and over again Jesus cures people of a physical affliction they bear. But the physical triumph is never the full point. In ways large and small, Jesus is always trying to push us to understand these healings as having a spiritual component as well. By curing people of their leprosy, he is not just getting rid of their skin problem, he's restoring them to the community, giving them back their life in the full meaning of that term.

Time and again, in those hospital rooms, I saw that level of healing taking place. I saw life being restored in the face of fear and despair. I saw families reconciled. I saw laughter and joy where you would expect to find only weeping and wailing. I saw a level of gratitude for love and life that was unparalleled. There was much sadness, and many tears. And the pain of loss was real and raw. But when we invited God into those rooms of illness and death, there was an undeniable lightness, and undeniable love that assured all of us that though our bodies have an expiration date, our souls, which are fed by the love of God present in those gathered, will never die. The prognosis didn't change when we prayed, but the patient did. Instead of fear and despair, there was hope and strength and joy. And that felt like an answered prayer to me.

In all likelihood you're carrying something right now that could use the soothing balm of the light of Christ which remedies all things. Bring it with you to the altar today. And as you kneel with outstretched hands, hold there in your palms whatever affliction you are bearing. Imagine God taking it out of your hands. Picture the Holy Spirit, that heavenly dove, swooping down and lifting it away, relieving you of its burden, and placing there instead the promise to fill you, to fill all corners of your heart, mind and soul, with His healing presence. A promise made real in the bread and wine we place into your open hands. When you come forward for communion you can be healed. You can be made whole in that you can be assured that Jesus loves and cares for every part of you, even the painful or diseased parts. Jesus is with you in your affliction. Jesus sees and soothes your pain. Jesus breaks in and dissolves your isolation. Jesus lifts your shame from your shoulders. Jesus heals us. Come, make an exchange—pain for love, darkness for light, isolation for company, sadness for joy, affliction for healing. Come to Jesus in faith, and you will be made well.