

## **“Jesus Jumps over the Social Norms as He Touches a Leper”**

Sermon notes from Episcopal Church of the Epiphany by the Rev. Arnold A. Bush, Priest in Charge, 2.12.2012, 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany

Texts: II Kings 5:1-15, “Naaman Healed of Leprosy”; Mark 1:40-45, “Jesus chooses to heal a leper”

Theme: God’s compassion reaches outside religious paradigms.

### **I. Introduction**

Last Sunday a young adult class at St. Stephen’s in Birmingham proposed a question that was to be discussed in all three weekly Bible study groups. During Jesus’ time, did the Jews believe that all sickness was the way God punished people for sin? Also, did the Jewish people in NT Times believe God blesses rich people because they are good? How would you answer those questions in a group of parishioners? Think about those questions. Does God make the good folks rich and punish the evil with sickness, or has sent his wrath to make people sick?

What inferences do you make as we reflect upon the Gospel story and the OT story of commander Naaman being healed of his leprosy by washing 7 times in the Jordan River?

### **II. What do we know about leprosy in Jesus’ culture?**

“Leprosy” was any type of skin disease or blemish. Hansen’s disease. (G.H. Hansen was a Norwegian physician who discovered the leprosy causing mycobacterium leprosy.). It could be any skin disorder that caused flaking or scaling.

- (a) In the Jewish law and culture the disease was considered communicable; thus one must not touch a leper. One who had such a disease was considered unclean, unholy, and certainly sinful.
- (b) It was assumed that God had directly afflicted those with the disease as a punishment for some transgression.
- (c) Jewish law and custom required that anyone with leprosy must shout to another person, “Unclean, Unclean. Stay away.”
- (d) Obviously they were SOCIAL OUTCASTS FROM THEIR SOCIETY. They lived in small circles together. Even up to the last century there were leper colonies or communities. (In the last decades there was leprosy on Cargill land in southern Louisiana in a bend in the MS River.)
- (e) Those who come in contact with a leper or person with infectious skin disease are to be considered unclean. (See Leviticus 13,14, 22:4)

### **III. What did Jesus do in this Jesus scene? MK 1:40ff**

Jesus is in the business of healing this outcast leper, who comes to Jesus begging and kneeling. Not shouting “Unclean, Unclean” but saying “If you choose you can make me clean; you have the power to heal me if you are willing... You must be different from the other religious leaders around here. You are different from any other religious leader I have encountered since I was afflicted. “

Then Jesus reaches out to TOUCH HIM BY STREATCHING OUT HIS HAND. Then he says, "I choose" or in other translations, "I am willing to make you clean." Jesus is breaking a popular Jewish understanding demonstrating that this leprosy is not a punishment for transgressions. There is not some cause and effect, as in "you did this, thus you will be punished with this disease." As I have said before, God's will for all of us is healing and wholeness. All the physicians in Central AL are not going against God's will when they work creatively to cure us of all sorts and conditions of illness. Suppose you went to a physician for an appointment and during the conversation he/she said, "Why, I cannot try to cure you of this sickness because God is punishing you for some evil you have done." Your physician is God's co-worker.

Let us remember that HEALING IS GOD'S WILL. Our physical illness is not the result of GOD'S WRATH. He is not willing illness.

Now, let us go back to the opening questions regarding "does God punish us by illness?" No, but even today we hear some religious leaders say otherwise. On the Sunday after 9/11 a few pastors said this attack was God punishing our country for falling away from God. Or after Hurricane Katrina, God was punishing that sinful city of New Orleans and the casinos on the Mississippi Gulf coast. A few said, "This was God's wrath."

#### IV. Secondly, Jesus defies all social customs/conventions.

Note, he reaches out to the social outcast and touches him. The social customs and OT regulations dictate one is not to come in contact with those who are unclean. Let's take a moment to identify some of the various groups of persons that may be considered "unclean," in that our social mores say we should not associate with these kinds of people. Examples are classes or groups of people where there are some barriers or social walls:

In growing up, do not associate children with polio or tuberculosis.

- a) White citizens.... black citizens
- b) Professional... Laborers
- c) Long time Episcopalian.... Hand-raising Pentecostal layperson
- d) Citizens... undocumented immigrants in AL
- e) Enlisted personnel.... Commissioned Officers
- f) Nazi clubs... Practicing Jewish families
- g) Rural folks.... City folks
- h) Islamic Middle Eastern person.... A faithful Christian who is an American citizen
- i) Gays and Lesbians. ...Conservative Christians
- j) Latino's....Anglo's in AL
- k) Jerusalem Jews.... Samaritans
- l) Church folks....ex-cons
- m) List can go on in each culture....

As I thought about this action of defiance, almost a protest of associating with persons who are outside social barriers/walls, I came up with these scenes:

- (a) John 4, Jesus talks at noon to the Samaritan Woman. (John 4:8: She says, “You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink? For Jews do not associate with Samaritans nor do they use the dishes Samaritans have used.”)
- (b) Jesus letting the children sit in his lap and his blessing them. The disciples ask then to depart. (Luke 18:15-17)
- (c) The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke)
- (d) Acts 10, Peter is unwilling to eat food that he perceived as “unclean.”  
I recall a few years ago the WWJD movement within the Christian retail market: Bracelets, banners, and shirts with WWJD.  
Here is an imaginary metaphor regarding What Would Jesus Do: A college Bible study group of conservative white Christians have been meeting for several months. They had “WWJD” on their shirts and bracelets. Trust and concern for each other were flourishing in the group. In the second semester an attractive black female student wanted to join the group. She started attending but in the second week she revealed that she served a year in women’s prison for theft from her employer and had lesbian tendencies. WWJD?

We who are members of a mainline Church, an Episcopal Church, we who are living in a state with sufficient biases and prejudices, we who have grown up in a culture with our “kind of people” or “they are not like us,” we who may have grown up in a family with norms not to associate with “those kind of people”--yes, we may need to ask the question, What Would Jesus Do? What will we do, what welcoming behaviors is God asking us to emulate to a person who is not “my kind of people” when someone comes to check us out at 9:30 am on Sunday.

Conclusion: (1) Remember the leper in Jesus’ culture; (2) God’s will is healing, not punishment for our sins; (3) Jesus steps through social and conventional barriers.

#### V. In the healing of Naaman (OT) God acts outside the religious structures.

In that beautiful story of Elisha healing the General Naaman of his leprosy, we see an omnipresent, transcendent God performing miracles on non-Hebrew people. He uses the strangest person in the healing process.

- (1) A slave girl in the house of Naaman recommends Naaman go to a prophet in Israel (8<sup>th</sup> Century BC)
- (2) King of Aram sends Naaman to the king of Israel (Northern Kingdom).
- (3) Naaman goes to Elisha the prophet, but Naaman expects Elisha to do a public demonstration. Naaman wants to go to rivers of Damascus, not Jordan.

- (4) His servants convince Naaman to be obedient to Elisha's instructions of washing 7 times in the Jordan.
- (5) His flesh is restored like the flesh of a young boy (Baptism waters, cleansing waters, a transformation, starting over as a young boy), Examples of how we like God to operate within the traditions of the Episcopal Church. God's grace shines on everyone. Yes, but, Sacraments are like a magnifying glass bringing the healing light to focus on us. In the sacrament his light is passing in a sharper focus and intensity to us.
  - (1) Music outside the official Hymnal
  - (2) Holy Week gestures that we have never seen
  - (3) PowerPoint and images used in sermons and/or instruction
  - (4) Casual dress for worship
  - (5) "Why go to Sunday School? I graduated from SS when I was confirmed."
  - (6) "Why bring up political issues or state and federal laws in the adult forum?"
  - (7) "I was taught not to clap in church."
  - (8) "Why can't we have 8:00 am said Eucharist with no sermon and no music?"
  - (9) "What's with all this studying the Bible for adults and teens? Why, that is what the Baptists and conservative right wing Christians do."
  - (10) "Why are we always praying for our political leaders? Let's just pray for our members and bishops."
  - (11) You may add to the list.