

Re-Entering The Camp (II Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45)

Every year, the women in our church family give some of their outreach money to the American Leprosy Mission. According to the American Leprosy Mission website, "109 countries reported leprosy in 2007. Nearly 300,000 new cases are diagnosed every year, and many more go undetected. Approximately 11% of these new cases are in children. In nine countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America leprosy is still considered a public health problem....Millions of people affected by leprosy worldwide live with permanent physical deformities and/or disabilities as well as debilitating social stigma associated with the disease."

After a little research, I learned that in 1873, Dr. Armauer Hansen of Norway was the first to see the leprosy germ under a microscope. Hansen's discovery was revolutionary because it proved that the terrible disease was not hereditary, a curse, or the result of sin. The evidence was clear: it was caused by a germ (*Mycobacterium leprae*). As a result of this discovery, those diagnosed with leprosy are now given medication while they continue to live at home and lead normal, productive, sociable lives.

But back in Jesus' day, this was not the leper's lot. No, the leper was an outcast. Jewish law was very clear about the leper. He was required to live apart from the rest of the community. In fact, so that there was no accidental mingling with non-lepers, he had to clearly identify himself as a leper by wearing torn clothing and disheveled hair. Furthermore, if anyone happened to come near him, he was to warn the person of his condition by shouting, "Unclean!" Yes, reading directly from Leviticus 13:45-46, "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.'"

You see, for the Jews, leprosy was more a spiritual than a medical condition. The leper was spiritually unclean, not pure enough for the holy God or the holy God's people. Leviticus (19:19) and Deuteronomy (22:10) stated that two different things should not be mixed together. Thus it was wrong to plant two kinds of grain in one field, and it was wrong to wear garments made of two kinds of cloth. To interbreed two kinds of cattle and to yoke two different animals--equally bad. So, since a leper had two colors of skin, the

Jews thought he was an abomination, an insult to the pure or holy God. Thus the Jews believed that God must have given the individual leprosy, as a judgment on the individual's sinfulness. Leprosy, in other words, was seen as the visible sign of an invisible sinfulness. A leper, under such condemnation by God, had to be kept outside the camp, lest his sinfulness rub off and contaminate the whole Jewish nation.

The fate of the leper was therefore placed in the hands of God's priests. As soon as a person was examined and pronounced a leper by a priest, the person had to leave the camp in which everyone else lived. Reading from Leviticus 13:46, "He...is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp."

Was there ever such a dreadful fate as that of the leper? He was physically ill, his flesh and nerves being constantly devoured by bacteria. He was labeled spiritually impure, toxic, sure to pollute or contaminate anyone with whom he came into contact. And thus he was also a social outcast. He had to live "outside the camp," away from other people, including his own family and friends. Physically, spiritually, religiously, and socially tormented.

And yet, in our gospel lesson for today, this particular leper found the courage to approach Jesus. Surely he'd heard about Jesus—how Jesus was moved by compassion to help those in need and how Jesus had the power to help those in need. The leper came right up to Jesus, and he didn't do so shouting, "Unclean! Unclean!" Instead, he boldly knelt in front of Jesus and begged, "If you choose, you can make me clean."

Now many translations have this response from Jesus: "Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!'" Other ancient texts, however, read, "Moved with anger, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!'" Commentators who believe the anger manuscripts are the most accurate are quick to point out that Jesus was angry not at the leper for approaching him, but rather, Jesus was angry at the disease and the way it brought brokenness, isolation, separation, division, destruction of life and community. Jesus was angry at the man's physical suffering and emotional exclusion. Jesus was angry at how the disease had torn apart the harmony God had created.

And so, in response, Jesus did something neither the Prophet Elisha with the leper Naaman nor perhaps anyone else had ever done. Jesus reached out and touched the leper. And herein is surely the reason this is considered an "epiphany" story. But what does Jesus' touching of the leper reveal about him and who he is?

To understand, we must realize that to all the bystanders that day, the leper was pretty much a living corpse. Doomed. Just a matter of time. Best left out of sight, out of mind. A hopeless case. Jesus' touch revealed Jesus as the one who isn't afraid of being contaminated by man's sin or uncleanness...the one who is willing to cross any boundary to help someone in need...the one who is willing to touch the untouchable...the one who boldly confronts that which is counter to God's plan...the one who sees no one as doomed...the one with whom nothing is impossible. Fred Craddock stated that in this passage we see a central theme of Mark's gospel and a major point of Jesus' ministry. Craddock said, "He (Jesus) is not seeking to be a star, known for relieving people of burdens and difficulties. All the way to the cross Jesus will be trying to get those who think, 'where the Messiah is, there is not misery' to accept a new perspective — 'where there is misery, there is the Messiah.'" So very much revealed in that touch.

When Jesus touched the man, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And after sternly warning him to not say anything to anyone, Jesus told the man to go and show himself to the priest--so that he could once more be part of the community--so that he could "re-enter the camp."

Another great story about Jesus. Another great story with messages for us as followers of Jesus. First, like our Lord, we are to always be attentive and looking for those who are hurting and "living outside the camp." Even before he finished dialing, the man somehow knew he'd made a mistake. The phone rang once, twice—then someone picked it up. "You got the wrong number!" a husky male voice snapped before the line went dead. Mystified, the man dialed again. "I said you got the wrong number!" came the voice. Once more the phone clicked down. The man thought, How could he possibly know I had a wrong number? At that time he worked for the New York City Police Department. As a policeman, he'd been trained to be curious—and concerned. So he dialed a third time. "Hey, c'mon," the voice said. "Is this

you again?" "Yeah, it's me. I was wondering how you knew I had the wrong number before I even said anything." "You figure it out!" The phone slammed down. The policeman sat there for a while, the receiver hanging loosely in his fingers. Then he called the man back. "Did you figure it out yet?" the man asked. "The only thing I can think of is...nobody ever calls you." "You got it!" The phone went dead for the fourth time. Chuckling, the officer dialed the man back. "What do you want now?" the man asked. "I thought I'd call—just to say hello." "Hello? Why?" "Well, if nobody ever calls you, I thought maybe I should." Yes, like our Lord, we are to always be attentive and looking for those who are hurting and "living outside the camp."

And, secondly, from today's story, we learn that, like our Lord, we are to boldly reach out and touch others. There's great power not only in Jesus' touch, but in ours as well. In May 1985, Brigitte Gemey was trapped beneath a 35-ton collapsed construction crane in New York City for six hours. Throughout her ordeal, she held the hand of rescue officer Paul Ragonese, who stayed by her side as heavy machinery moved the tons of twisted steel from her crushed legs. It was a stranger's touch that gave her hope and the will to live. And then there's the example of Dr. Morris Weigelt, who went through a time of deep depression in his life. He particularly hit a low spot one night in the hospital when, as he put it, "all of his insecurities and depression came upon him." Weigelt got out of bed and walked the halls looking for someone awake and willing to give him a hug. The only person he could find was a huge, burly security guard. "Sir," he said, "Would you give me a hug?" "I sure will!" the security guard responded. Dr. Weigelt indicated that he found comfort and encouragement from the touch of the big burly security guard. He returned to his room and slept peacefully. Yes, like our Lord, we are to boldly reach out and touch others.

Third, though, the story points out that, like our Lord, we're to be about giving hope to those who know the despair of being on the outside looking in. Up the street from a new pastor's apartment were two of the few rundown houses in the town. The porches were falling off. Children who lived in the houses played in the street and hung out on the street corners. At one of the first small group meetings the pastor attended, an elderly parishioner asked, "Have you met the kids up the street yet? They used to come to our church. Those kids have it rough. Their dad abandoned the family. The

mother has two paper routes and does odd jobs even though she can't speak English well." Testing the acceptance and inclusion quotients of the small group, the new pastor responded, "We will look them up. You know the church exists for them." The woman, and other members of the group, replied, "That's right. We need to get them back into the church and help them out." John realized then that he was among an open accepting congregation that practiced a ministry of inclusion to those who were rejected by many in the town. Yes, like our Lord, we're to be about giving hope to those who know the despair of being on the outside looking in.

And, finally, the story makes it clear that, like our Lord, we're to see persons as children of God, rather than as clean or unclean. Almost everyone saw Michael Wayne Hunter as unclean. Thus he was put on death row in 1983 in California's San Quentin Prison. One day, during his third year on death row, he was getting ready to go exercise when the guard said, "You're going to miss Mother Teresa. She's coming today to see you guys." "Yea, sure," he said. But, a little later, he realized that Mother Teresa had indeed come to see him and the other prisoners. So Michael jogged up to the front in gym shorts and a tattered basketball shirt with the arms ripped out, and, sure enough, there was this tiny woman who looked 100 years old. It was indeed Mother Teresa. This hardened prisoner wrote about his experience. He said, "You have to understand that, basically, I'm a dead man. I don't have to observe any sort of social convention; and as a result, I can break all the rules, say what I want. But one look at this Nobel Prize winner, this woman so many people view as a living saint, and I was speechless." He said an incredible vitality and warmth came from her piercing eyes. She smiled at him, blessed a religious medal, and then touched him as she put the medal in his hands. All he could say was, "Thank you, Mother Teresa." And before she left, Mother Teresa turned and pointed her hand at the guard and said, "What you do to these men, you do to God." This was a turning point in the life of Michael Wayne Hunter. He was cleansed--changed. So drastic was the change that a new trial was set for him, and the death penalty was not sought. He became a model prisoner and an award-winning writer--because someone had reached out and touched him, healed him, brought him into the family of God.

All around us, there are those who feel lonely and isolated, for all sorts of reasons. They're not confined to "leper colonies," but nonetheless, they

know the heartache of living "outside the camp." May we do all we can to help them "re-enter the camp." Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; February 15, 2009