

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

February 15, 2009

Epiphany 6B 2009

In the Name of our One ever living, ever compassionate God:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's readings from the Second Book of Kings from Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel of Mark deal with healings, more specifically the healings of two very different lepers living in different times and cultures. The leprosy of the Bible is not the same as Hansen's disease that made Father Damien and the Kalaupapa Peninsula famous. Biblical leprosy was a discoloring skin disorder, probably fungal or bacterial, that was considered highly contagious.

We fear what we don't understand and can't control. Leprosy arouses a sense of vulnerability and fear and in both readings the only known remedy was to ban the leper from all social contact with those deemed healthy. So in addition to the physical ailment, lepers also suffered the isolation and mental pain of being treated as social outcasts. They were no longer brothers and sisters, daughters and sons – the culture demanded otherwise. Whom could they trust or turn to now?

I live the story of Naaman, the great and victorious general and commander of the King of Aram's army. When stricken by leprosy he heard from a young slave girl from Israel of a prophet in her country who could cure him. He tells this to his King who writes a letter to the King of Israel asking for the prophet Elisha to heal his general. The King of Israel fears that this is a pretext for war and tears his garments in

despair. Hearing this, Elisha invites Naaman to come “so that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel. All eyes are now on Naaman and Elisha.

Naaman sets off on his journey with all his soldiers and horses and with lots of gold and silver and fancy gifts. However, his journey is not just one from Aram to Israel, but one from pride and grandiosity to faith and simplicity. Naaman arrives with his retinue and treasure at Elisha’s house and Elisha would have none of it. Instead he sends a servant to the door to tell Naaman to thoroughly cleanse himself by washing seven times in the Jordan.

Naaman is beside himself. He seethes with anger. Etiquette had been breached! Doesn’t that fool of a prophet know how important I am? He should have been there to greet me. He expected to buy a cure that only he could afford from a powerful magician. Instead a prophet of this God sends a servant to tell Naaman to wash himself in the Jordan! His servants talk him down and get him to agree to try something simple when he would have gladly done difficult things. When he washed himself, he became clean. When he tries to give Elisha the treasure, Elisha refuses pointing out that the healing was the Lord’s doing not his. Naaman returns to Aram with his treasure and something greater – a true sense of self, faith in the universal God of Israel and two sacks of soil more valuable than his treasure that enabled him to worship the Lord when in Aram.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus also encounters a leper who kneels before him and asks, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” The situation was a bit more problematic for Jesus. You see, for the Hebrews of Jesus’ times a religious ban was added to the social ostracism. Leprosy was looked upon as the ultimate punishment for sin and one could not enter the Temple. Anyone a leper touched was also deemed

to become religiously impure. Our reading says that upon hearing the leper's request Jesus became "moved with pity" and said "I so choose. Be made clean!" Other ancient translations say that Jesus became "greatly angered." Compassion and anger are both relational emotions. Both arise from a strong sense of connection with or on behalf of others. Here Jesus runs head on into the religious authorities and their theology of the times that made the sufferer responsible for his suffering by attributing sin to him, thus isolating him not only socially but also religiously. Jesus' compassion was for the leper's plight; Jesus' anger was directed at a theology, a purity system that would, in the name of his Father, seek to remove the leper from the religious life of the community by branding him or her a sinner.

It is important information Mark gives when he says that Jesus "reached out his hand and said 'I do choose. Be made clean.'" By touching the leper, Jesus challenged the Levitical law and assumed a priestly power of the Temple to make one clean. In so doing, Jesus challenged the deep-seated social and religious belief system that leads to the belief that sickness is self-inflicted by sin and is the result of divine judgment and renders those identified as sick to being judged by God to be unclean and thus subject to social stigmatization.

What does this mean for us today? If Jesus would have compassion and anger for the suffering of the lepers of his day, would he expect any less from his disciples today? There are always religious and political powers that are all too ready to declare others to be judged sinners by God and thus to be isolated, demeaned and stigmatized – for the good of all, of course. Such people claim to know not only what God does, but why God does it. They still exist today and I don't mind naming names – Pat Robertson, James Dobson and Peter Akinola come readily to mind and there are thousands of others. Throughout the millennia, people have been declared unclean,

condemned and inferior in the name of God for all sorts of conditions – race, gender, epilepsy or other illnesses, falling in love with someone from another race or culture, even left-handedness!

Jesus could have avoided the situation. After all, he couldn't cure everybody; Why not give this one a miss? Perhaps seeing not only the illness but also the additional burdens placed on this leper in the name of his Father was too much to bear. Jesus chose healing - not just a cure but a restoration to wholeness and to the community – over avoidance or going along with the system. A simple cure wouldn't have been enough; the leper needed healing that only inclusion in the love of God can bring. Like Naaman, he got a lot more than he asked for. Jesus said, “I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”

What lessons can we draw from these stories? How does Naaman's journey from pride and grandiosity echo in our lives, in our society and in our economy today? Who needs to be embraced by us even in the face of social and religious pressure in order to be made whole and brought into community? I don't like to give answers in my sermons; it just isn't the Episcopal DNA to tell others what to think. A good question we ask ourselves is better than a lot of answers given to us by others. Beside, I think they are many who needed healing touch and compassion – we might find them in our families, or in our congregation. They might be found in our communities or in our nation. They might even be the animals and our very earth. Every person, every community and every nation has someone or something that can be healed by touch, understanding, compassion and justice.

Amen.