

A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

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Most of us have probably heard about leprosy just from coming to Church and reading the Bible. Today we are surrounded by lepers in both the Old Testament and Gospel readings for the day. But it is unlikely that many of us here today have actually ever met a real leper, unless you have traveled to India or Myanmar or Nepal. The Centers for Disease Control reported just 92 cases in the United States in 2003, the most recent year I could find reports for.

Treating what epidemiologists call “Hansen’s disease” is relatively easy and inexpensive for modern medicine. The challenge, as is the case with so many basic healthcare needs, is not financial or scientific but political: how do we deliver modern medical assistance to the places where it is most needed?

The Biblical commentaries point out that the Bible uses the term in a more generic and less clinical way than the CDC or World Health Organization do to cover a whole range of skin diseases, and not just Hansen’s disease. Whatever the precise diagnosis, though, what seems clear in Scripture is that the range of ailments generically known as “leprosy” made a person *ritually* unclean. It made that person an outcast. Leviticus 13 reads like a health journal, but the gist of the chapter is theological: those whom the priest determines should be diagnosed as “lepers” must...

...wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose and 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. (Leviticus 13:45)

My undergraduate students over at Assumption are usually surprised to learn that we don’t possess Mark’s original manuscript of his Gospel—or for that matter any “first edition” of any Biblical book. In a world before copy machines, scribes painstakingly copied these texts by hand and what we have are copies. And because of human error, sometimes old manuscripts disagree with one another.

So occasionally you will find a note in a text that points out where there are discrepancies and today’s gospel is one of those times. We heard that Jesus is “moved to pity” when this leper asks Jesus to heal him, and of course that makes sense within context. But some of the most ancient

manuscripts use a different word to describe a different emotion: they say that Jesus was moved to anger. That he was “enraged.”

I can’t tell you which is right—this is one of those cases in reading the Bible where we can’t know with certainty which word is right, What we can do and what I want to do briefly is to explore why that might be the right reading.

Some of us tend to get a bit nervous thinking about “meek and mild” Jesus getting angry. But Scripture is clear that Jesus is like us in every way except sin. Anger itself is just an emotion like sadness or joy or excitement—one of many emotions that are simply part of being alive. There is no sin in feeling angry, especially if our anger is justified. The question is always one of what we do with that. Some of us don’t like feeling angry or don’t think it’s “Christian” so we deny it, or sweep it under the nearest carpet, or direct it internally, or misdirect it in passive-aggressive behaviors. The challenge when we feel angry is to name it and confront it and work through it. And I want to suggest that it is quite possible that in this healing story that is exactly what Jesus is doing.

One provocative scholar (Ched Myers) suggests that this healing is a frontal attack on the purity code itself. Just as Jesus chooses to heal on the Sabbath, and later will cleanse the Temple in Jerusalem, so Myers suggests that what is going on in the healing of this leper is that Jesus is trying to provoke a reaction from the whole social and theological system that divides the world into “clean” and “unclean.” Jesus is picking a fight with those would quote Scripture in order to make anyone with a skin ailment cry out “unclean, unclean” and separate them out from the community and call that “the will of God.”

To grasp why that might be the case, it helps to see how the purity system of first-century Judaism as not unlike the Hindu caste system. At the top were the priests—the ritually cleanest of the clean. Then come the Levites, and then other Israelites, followed by converts to the faith, freed slaves, and then those damaged physically; then women, then menstruating women, then Gentiles and so forth. Lepers are at the bottom; the Jewish equivalent of an “untouchable”—forced to wear torn clothes and unkempt hair and shout out “unclean, unclean” whenever anyone is nearby. Quite the sight to behold, I imagine.

So Myers reads the leper’s question as almost a dare. The man knows how the system works and he knows that Jesus isn’t a priest. The leper says to Jesus, if you will, you can make me clean—essentially saying, “do you have the guts for this? Do you dare to make me clean because if you do you are surely going to be labeled a trouble-maker by those who have a stake in keeping their tidy little categories of clean and unclean intact.”

So that’s why Myers thinks those older manuscripts might be right. If he’s right, then Jesus is angry not at this leper but at the system itself and at those who keep it in place. To read the text in this way is to hear it unfold something like this:

A leper came to Jesus *begging* him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you dare, you can make me clean." Infuriated, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said "I do

choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean and Jesus sent him away, saying, "now go show yourself to the priests..."

Regardless of what Jesus is feeling or thinking, whether anger or pity, there is no disagreement about the fact that he stretches out his hand to *touch* this leper. We saw him do the same thing last weekend in the home of Simon where Jesus touched Peter's mother-in-law. According to the rules, touching this leper makes Jesus unclean. He is the one who, according to the rules, is supposed to now go and see the priests and get himself pronounced "clean" because the cooties might have rubbed off on him. In this action, Jesus is confronting not just this terrible skin disease that ostracizes this man from his neighbors; he is assaulting a theology that divides the world into "clean" and "unclean," a theology which denies this man his full humanity.

Jesus touches this leper. I have no doubt that if Jesus can heal this leper he could have done so without having to touch him. He could have prayed over him; but he chooses to touch the man. Centuries later in a little town in Umbria, our patron, Francis, would do the same thing. St. Bonaventure shares the story in his *Life of St. Francis*: Francis encountered a leper by the side of the road and he was horrified. Then he realized that if he was going to devote his life to the poor he must do more than offer a few coins as a gesture of charity. He believes that what he really needs to do is to embrace the leper as a brother. So he slips off his horse and runs to the leper and kisses him. Centuries later, Mother Teresa would comment, "The encounter with the leper *made* St. Francis." For her own part, she too would tend to the lepers of Calcutta, insisting that she found "the Lord Jesus himself" in the "distressing disguise of the poor."

Whether it is pity or anger that motivated Jesus or Francis or Mother Theresa, in each case there is more going on than the healing of an outcast. The healing Spirit of God moves in both directions: that leper *made* St. Francis. What then of us, a community seeking to follow the Way of Jesus, a people who look to Francis of Assisi as someone who got it and as a light to his own generation inspires us to be lights in this time and place?

It is highly unlikely that any of us will run into a leper on our way to work tomorrow—there are only about 92 documented cases in the entire country. Maybe someone will be inspired by this sermon to leave all things behind and move to the streets of Calcutta as a missionary. But what about the rest of us? Who are the lepers that Christ calls you to embrace? I suspect we know this first in our guts rather than in our heads: we see someone coming toward us and we think, "Lord have mercy; I hope they don't see me!"

I suspect that like Francis and Theresa, our own transformation and healing begin whenever and wherever we overcome our prejudices and squeamishness to reach out to someone the world has treated like they belong in a leper colony. By the grace of God, we are able to see before our very eyes a human being, a person created in the image of God, a fellow traveler; our sister or brother. Christ himself, as Mother Theresa might put it, in "the distressing disguise of the poor." Worlds are changed and scales drop from our eyes and healing cuts in all directions whenever and wherever that happens. Christ is made manifest and it is not only those who have been defined as "unclean" who are healed. We, ourselves, are also healed—and a new community is created.