

Sermon, February 15, 2009
6th Sunday in Epiphany

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Marion, MA

Leprosy, known to modern medicine as Hansen's Disease, has been known since biblical times. It is a wasting physical disease characterized by disfiguring skin sores, nerve damage, and progressive debilitation, particularly in the extremities. People with long-term leprosy may lose the use of their hands or feet due to repeated injury resulting from lack of sensation. Leprosy is caused by bacteria, and is now effectively treated with antibiotics. About 95% of the human race has a genetic immunity to infection. (Copyright 1997-2009, American Accreditation HealthCare Commission (www.urac.org). Inc., www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001347.htm)

It is probable that the term, leper, was assigned to persons who had any number of obvious skin diseases, particularly if they entailed a loss of pigment, or caused flaking, or light colored lesions on the skin. Beyond the pain and disfiguration it brought to the one infected, it was associated in the eyes of the religious community with impurity, with uncleanness. In the biblical era, these diseases carried with them a terrible social stigma. The person afflicted was seen as a risk to the health and well-being of the community. A person diagnosed with leprosy was required to announce his polluted presence to passers-by crying out, "unclean... unclean..." Ostracism and exile may have been a kind of draconian method of disease prevention, but the effects on those sent away are easily imagined to any of us.

The important points from the Old and New Testament readings for us are these two:

- 1) God's will is to heal our diseases, whatever their origins;
- 2) God's love is sure to reach out to and address any condition that leaves a person stigmatized, isolated from the concern of the community, and made to feel like an outcast.

The Episcopal Church, in its clergy and lay leadership, in its programmatic focus, has been in the forefront of ministry with those affected by HIV-AIDS. In the first years of this unfolding epidemic, fear and a lack of medical knowledge were mixed with, and intensified the prevailing disdain for homosexual people. With

uncertainties about disease transmission, with a disproportionate spread of the disease among intra-venous drug users and gay men, Episcopalians have gone against the cultural currents to extend love, medical and pastoral care to modern-day “lepers.” This counter-cultural initiative has extended its reach to the families of those affected. The ministry that began in hospice settings in the U.S., attending to the dying and bereaved, has now expanded globally to include education, AIDS prevention, medical care, and ministry with AIDS infected children or AIDS orphans, particularly in Africa.

Given the racial, cultural, and geographic boundaries that the faithful have crossed to achieve these extensions of compassion and care, it is, to many of us, a sign that Jesus is alive and well, still in our midst, still reaching beyond convention and custom to proclaim good news, to heal, to restore broken hearts, and to reclaim as his own those who feel lost, unworthy, and forgotten.

Now I recognize that our church is like a family, and the members of a family don't always see eye to eye. Some of my brothers and sisters on the left are thinking, “Finally, the man has stressed the importance of our baptismal promise to respect the dignity of every human being.” Some of my brothers and sisters on the right are wondering, “Doesn't this amount to a tacit endorsement of risky, avoidable behaviors that have led directly to so much suffering?” Let's see if we can keep our grip on the handrails of justice and mercy simultaneously. Even pacifists and conscientious objectors to war can find peace in their consciences by serving in the medical corps, working to heal the injuries of combat that they can under no circumstances condone. We support rehabilitation efforts for folks emerging from drug and alcohol dependence. We obey Jesus explicit instructions to visit convicted criminals in prison, extending the love and mercy of God. Even if risky, avoidable behaviors have led to the suffering of a neighbor, the Christian witness is consistent.

Easthampton Baptist minister.... We try to build a fence that keeps folks from falling over the cliff. “ God, give us the grace and wisdom to do both, and all with the touch of your love that is unmistakable

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People of faith look to God and aspire to a range of virtuous ideals: purity, health, life-long committed loving relationships; to sobriety, discipline and self-control; to faithful corporate worship and personal devotion; to just dealings; to

peacemaking; to sharing and generous charity. We feel blessed when we obey the laws of God and when we bring credit to our family, community or nation. To the degree that God's grace enables any of us to live into these ideals, we all run into the occupational hazard of smug self-righteousness. We are all prone to the pharisaical pride that would pray, "I thank God that I am not like others, and especially not like that sinner over there..."

The first caveat is that Jesus reminds every single one of us to look carefully, honestly, and deeply into the reality of our own hearts, imaginations, and wills. Are things as pure and good in there as our public appearance seems to be?

So that we might be truly known as members of Christ's Body,

God, awaken us quickly to **whatever** offends your love.

Give us empathetic hearts to recognize suffering and despair wherever they draw your children down and away.

In the power of Jesus Christ, help us extend your loving, healing touch,

always to restore hope,

always to restore relationship with you, without whom we are truly lost.

Amen.