

Sermon preached October 14, 2007

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Ruth 1: (1-7) 8-19a)  
2 Timothy 2:(3-7) 8-15  
Luke 17: 11-19  
Psalm 113

In this story, we have Jesus and ten lepers. Or we have nine lepers, and a tenth. The tenth leper, a man twice marginalized, a Samaritan and a leper, walks all the way back to Jesus and throws himself at his feet.

So, what happened to the ten lepers, and particularly, to the one who came back to Jesus? What is healing?

Part of healing, I think, happens when we find a compassionate listener, (and I'm going to get back to compassion) either in our own hearts or outside ourselves, in someone else: in therapy, with a priest or a best friend, or with Jesus. We have the chance to rework the raw material of our lives, to create a narrative that now has purpose and meaning, to make a new story.

The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate new story. Out of the chaos of death and execution, a new story was written and revealed. The new narrative has purpose and meaning. It is not a story that banishes the old one; everything that happened to Jesus is still true, all the ups and all the downs. His moments of glory and his moments of failure. But the resurrection casts it all in a new light, with a new purpose, and a new meaning. And something new happened not only to Jesus, but to his disciples. They went into hiding after the crucifixion. They were shattered and lost. But after the resurrection appearances, they walked back out into the world. They were braver and

stronger; they visited strangers, and healed the sick. It was not just what they saw when they saw the resurrected Jesus, but what was set free in them.

What if the resurrection is not about the appearances of Jesus alone but also about what those appearances point to, what they *ask of us*?

When I look at this gospel story again, I see that something happened to the tenth leper. He no longer “kept his distance.” He walked right up to Jesus and fell at his feet. He may have even covered Jesus’s feet with his newly healed hands, just like that woman who bathed Jesus with her tears.

It may have been hard for him to accept healing as it is for any of us to let go of old, painful patterns. He may have grown used to being an outcast, and a beggar. But we know that something happened to him, because he did not wander away like the other nine, seeking some sort of certification from the religious hierarchy. He turned back, to the person who had touched his poor skin, and he thanked him. It was not just what he saw when he saw Jesus, but what was set free in him. He was not only healed, he was changed. And that’s what makes this gospel a resurrection story.

That’s what the resurrection is all about, for us. We are asked to take the chaos and trauma of the past and write a new story. We are asked to be changed.

And there’s another part to the gospel. It’s the part played by Jesus.

First of all, let’s imagine the scene. The gospel says that Jesus “saw them.” He actually saw the lepers. How many of us, and I include myself in this, no longer see the men standing beside the stop signs with the signs held up asking for food? Jesus saw the lepers, and he stopped. I imagine he called out to them. And I imagine the lepers were amazed, that a person, a healthy person, was calling out to a leper to come over.

The scene I imagine is like a story I heard at San Francisco General Hospital in the AIDS ward, when I visited that place as a reporter, in 1985, when AIDS was like the plague. Everyone was scared, some were terrified; no one knew exactly how it was transmitted.

San Francisco General was a crumbling dark red brick hospital, its bricks blackened by exhaust from the nearby freeway, and the AIDS ward was in a completely separate wing of the hospital. The ward was like those field hospitals during a war into which the maimed and destroyed were brought to die. The nurses were the front line medics in the war on AIDS. They kept a book of names of the men who had died there, written at first in normal script and then smaller and smaller because there were so many names and they had run out of space. I was a young reporter and I was scared to death to walk in the door.

The first person I met was the head nurse, a man named Bill, a tall guy from Queens. Now everyone on the ward wore gloves and a mask at all times. Some of the nurses wore full body suits with ventilators. But Bill did not wear a mask. He rarely wore gloves. I asked him why and he told me this story.

The year before I visited there, Bill arrived from another hospital on the ward, fully gowned, masked, and gloved.

One night, a patient, Julian, was dying in room A-15. Julian could not sleep. Nothing seemed to work for him. Bill began to massage Julian's feet with his gloves on and finally said to himself, This is ridiculous. You cannot catch AIDS by rubbing a man's feet. And so Bill took his gloves off. He massaged Julian's feet with his hands and, at last, Julian slept.

Next, was the mask. Bill was treating a man who had pneumocystis pneumonia, a pneumonia caused by a parasite that lodges itself in the sac at the base of the lungs where carbon dioxide is exchanged for oxygen. The protozoa turned the normally flexible lungs to rigid bags of glass.

The men with pneumocystis had to be placed on ventilators, even though the blowing of the air from the machine could blow a hole in the by now stiff and rigid lungs. Ventilators bring sputum straight up from the lung, bypassing the various tissues that catch fluid before it goes into the air. That sputum contained the protozoa. So the nurses were particularly worried about the men with pneumocystis who were on ventilators.

Bill wore his mask into the room with the man with pneumocystis, a man I'll call Steve. Until one day, Bill remembered what he had read: that the protozoa existed everywhere, on tabletops, on doorknobs, on the hands, and was only lethal to those with compromised immune systems. He thought why not take off the mask so Steve can see me smile. And Steve said, "You aren't afraid of me anymore, are you?"

Gloves, masks, suits. Imagine dying in a room with everyone around you wearing a mask. The men who had AIDS in those early days were often compared to lepers. Bill changed that. He wrote a new story in the AIDS ward. He wasn't Jesus. He did not have the capacity to fully heal someone, but you know, and I know, that a lot of healing went on in that ward after Bill took off his gloves and his mask.

And there is more to this healing gospel, and more to Jesus's compassion. The compassion of Jesus for those who were poor, or deaf, or blind, or sick with leprosy was, as the theologian Walter Brueggemann has

said, “a radical form of criticism,” a radical form of criticism. Let me unpack that. Jesus’s compassion and the healing that flows from it announces that, “the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal...but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition...”

Jesus in his compassion says that the affliction of this leper, his pain, his disease, and his marginalization, are to be taken seriously, and are not to be accepted as normal. It is not normal for people to be without food; it is not normal for someone who is a leper or someone who is blind or deaf to have to beg on the street. Your pain, your confusion, the way you might be outcast in this society, are to be taken seriously. Being forced to the margins of life is not to be accepted as normal.

But, the Roman empire and at least part of the religious establishment of Jesus’ day allowed people to be cast out. They allowed people to beg on the street. In the same way we do today. The Roman rulers allowed lepers to be ostracized by the society, to beg on the streets and to die, and they expected their citizens to remain silent in response. “Empires,” as Brueggemann says, “are never built nor are they maintained on the basis of compassion...”

But Jesus doesn’t play by those rules. He doesn’t drive by in his car. He doesn’t turn up the sound in his headphones. He doesn’t go shopping. He stops, he sees the lepers, and he heals them. By healing these men, Jesus takes the first step in revealing “the abnormality that has become business as usual.

“Thus his compassion is ...a criticism of the system... that produces the hurt.” Bill Nelson, the nurse on the AIDs ward, became a living

criticism of those of us who went on wearing gloves and masks, long after they were known to be unnecessary.

And what happens to Jesus? “Finally Jesus enters into the hurt and comes to embody it.” He enters into the hurt of the leper, he enters the pain of the people who live on the street, the women raped in the Congo, the children dying in Darfur, he enters into the pain you suffer when you are outcast and ostracized, laid off from your job, or sick with cancer or AIDS or old and deaf and worn-out. He goes all the way into the pain, and finally into the death caused by the violence of an empire determined to keep its power at any cost.

I imagine the tenth leper heard about that story. The parade in Jerusalem. The execution. I’ll bet he was afraid. Maybe he’d be associated with this guy. Maybe the police would come looking for him. And maybe he felt himself giving into despair: if the one who saved him could not save himself, what did that mean? What did life mean?

And then, maybe the travelers came, and he heard the other stories. Jesus had been seen, they said, he had spoken. It was he, not someone else. It was he, and not quite he. “It was his Reality,” one of them said. And when she broke bread at the table with the man healed of leprosy, and handed it around to him and the others, maybe he caught some of that Reality from her. He caught some of the liveliness and compassion he remembered from that old healing, a long time ago when he was knitted back into the world.

Then he felt strong, again, and brave again, and maybe he left that night and traveled with her and her friends, the followers of Jesus. Maybe he, too, did some of his own healing, little things: a girl sick with dysentery, a boy afraid of the dark, a man who simply needed someone to listen to him. And, of course, he must have met with many who had leprosy, who were

cast out and hidden and begging on the streets. Maybe the tenth leper whispered to them the same words that Jesus whispered to him when he was alone and sick on that old road. He told them to come near, that he was not afraid, that to him they were precious and irreplaceable. Maybe he tells them that he has a dream of a kingdom where everyone is equal and everyone is treated with dignity and no one is ever cast out. When he helps in this way, in the way that he alone can help, I think he understands why he was given and why he took that second chance. Why he was healed. And how now he is writing a new story. Amen.