

Healing or Wholeness?

“Leper-outcast-unclean”

The words echoed in the man's head. Words prescribed by law that had left him alone, isolated from everything that brought joy and value to the lives of other people. Isolated from family and friends by a disability over which he had no control. Unable to work, for fear that in some way the uncleanness would be catching. Unable to even be touched, lest the person who touched him would be made unclean too. So when he heard who was coming, the man with leprosy went to the road to meet Jesus as if he was his last hope.

The law as written in Leviticus was quite clear about what should happen to a person with leprosy, a category that included not only Hansen's Disease but many other kinds of skin conditions including things that we would today consider severe eczema or skin rashes. Leprosy was a visible disfigurement that made someone unclean, unable to participate in the life of his community. It was treated as if it were very infectious. *Leviticus* says, “ The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ ⁴⁶He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” The illness itself was a physical problem to be dealt with. The cause of his pain was being cut off from human community.

Leprosy is not a real issue for us in the 21st century. There are few cases identified in the U.S. each year and many can be effectively dealt with medically. But the social isolation brought on by other diseases, disabilities and conditions can be just as devastating. Think back to when the AIDS epidemic raged without a cure and people were abandoned by their families in fear and rejection. Even now, an HIV-positive person is careful about revealing their status, knowing they will be judged and rejected. Homeless people tell about those who walk by day after day without making eye contact, as if being homeless makes you less than human and the condition might be catching. Anyone in a wheelchair is can't even get into many buildings so they're cut off

from whatever happens there. The unemployment rate among people with disabilities is nearly twice that of the general population. Not having a job means that not only can you not earn your own money, you are cut off from the daily interaction with co-workers and customers and the value that is given to a person who has a job. Others are constantly judged and cut off because of the color of their skin or their gender. Yes, there are “untouchables” among us.

For “lepers” or “untouchables” sometimes the isolation and lack of worth are worse than the underlying condition that put them there. Not always, but sometimes, it is not physical healing or transformation they long for, but the gift of a simple caring touch, the acknowledgement that they are part of the human community, the opportunity to share our gifts as part of the community rather than simply be an object of pity or derision.

So the leper, who wasn't even supposed to talk to anyone, who was supposed to stay off by himself, went to the road, and instead of yelling “Unclean”, he asked – pleaded – to be made clean. Not to be healed, but to be put in a right relationship as part of the community again, able to worship and to live in town and to work – to be able to be touched.

Jesus saw and heard him and he got angry. The NRSV says he had compassion, but most scholars agree the word Mark originally used here was “angry”. And a few words later, when he commanded the man to go away and tell no one, he did it in an angry tone of voice. The anger didn't surprise the man with leprosy. He was used to that response from people who were afraid of his touch. But that's not what Jesus was angry about. He wasn't angry at the man who had the sheer nerve to come and ask him for help. I think he was angry at the disease itself and its awful social results, as we are when we get angry at the cancer that attacks a 40-year-old friend, or at the addiction that destroys not just one person but a whole family, or at the dementia that takes away the identity of an intelligent, vibrant family member. Angry at something

that just isn't right, angry at something that needs to be fixed and for most of us is out of our power to repair.

Jesus didn't let his anger get in the way of doing something. Instead it motivated him. He did what the man asked for and more. He reached out his hand and he touched him. Jesus reached through the rules and restrictions. He reached through the fear and confusion. He reached past the anger to compassion. With one touch of his hand, he drew the man with leprosy back into the human community and into the community of faith. When was the last time the man had been touched by another human being? It was touching that made the uncleanness spread. But here, with Jesus, it acted in reverse. Instead of the leper's uncleanness spreading to Jesus, Jesus' cleanness and purity spread to the man. Rejection was transformed into acceptance. Exclusion was transformed into inclusion. Instead of Jesus being drawn into exile, the man who formerly had leprosy was drawn back into community. With Jesus' touch, he was clean and whole.

He was so excited he couldn't keep quiet! In spite of Jesus' command not to tell anyone, he spread the word to everyone who could hear. He was clean! He was whole! He could come home!

This is what Jesus offers us and all people. With his touch, with his life, with his death and resurrection, according to Ephesians 2, he restores us to relationship with God and with one another. Jesus creates a new community out of those who were once the in-group and the out-group. Jesus makes us whole.

This is what we in the church can offer to one another as well. We pray for cures for diseases and disabilities, but those cures are beyond our power and they don't always come. But we can offer community to one another, a community where no one is untouchable, where each person no matter who they are has a role to play. That is a different kind of healing, one that offers

wholeness not necessarily in body but in restoration to the community, a community that accepts and cares.

In her book "A Healing Homiletic" , Kathy Black says, "Disability is part of everyday existence for millions of people and their loved ones in this world. Does God cause it to happen? No. That does not mean, however, that God is not present for us in the midst of it, willing each person's well being even in the situation of permanent disability. God can transform our lives through the healing touch of an interdependent community of faith."

What does that community look like? It's a place where we support each other, not just with casseroles and the flowers from church in moments of crisis, but day in and day out, asking how people are doing and taking the time to actually listen even if their speech is garbled, offering rides and holding open doors. It's a place where we make decisions about how to support people with disabilities by talking to them instead of talking about them. It's a place where we listen to each person's story trusting that they have something to teach us and something to offer to the whole community.

How have you been touched by Jesus' hand? Who reached out to you when you were on the outside, longing to come in? How can you offer that same healing touch to another, in his name?