

Today=s Lepers

I don=t know about you, but today=s first reading sends a chill down my spine. Can you imagine not only the physical suffering from such a chronic, incurable condition as leprosy but even worse having to warn any who approached you by crying Aunclean, unclean!@ and being told you had to find a place outside of town, away from the rest of us? Leprosy was more than a disease, it was a curse. It inspired terror. For it disfigured one=s appearance, and in a largely oral, honor- shame culture one=s appearance was all important. In Greek for example, the word for good and the word for beauty and grace was the sameBkalon, noble in English. A noble appearance bespoke a noble character.

All of us, I suspect, have had moments when we worry whether we too would be treated like lepers if people were to penetrate behind our public appearance and see us as we really are. All of us know how crippling can be the fear of being shamed and shunned if we were to say what we really think, or if we were to stand up to those who we know would only exploit the opportunity to ridicule and shame us again. A Jesuit friend of mine, Dick Case, who had spent his life working on the Indian missions had a great saying for us in times such as these. What other people think about you, he would say, is none of your business. What other people think of you is none of your business. Let go of trying to meet the expectations of others, and strive to live up to your own. Be yourself, listen to the spirit dwelling within your heart, and do what it says.

Dick also had a great way of putting how we should treat others too. He would speak of the AKin-dom of God.@ Not kingdom, but Akindom.@. For in God=s sight we are all family. And so we are called to treat the poor and the sick as close relatives who have fallen on hard times, to treat the sinner as a stray son or daughter.

The moral measure of a society is not in the number of its poor and possessed, its sick and its sinners, for as Jesus himself says, these are with us always. No, the measure of a society is in how we care for our poor and possessed, our sick and our sinners. A society that seeks to expel and expunge itself of those it judges Aunclean@ may appear pure, but it is a living hell for all who fear that they may fall short. On the other hand a society that seeks to embrace and empower those who fall or fail is the very presence of heaven on earthBthe realization of God=s Kindom.

We can treat leprosy today. We can cure it. But there are still groups that we treat as lepers. In disfiguring one's appearance, leprosy attacked one's self worth, one's very soul. What lies at the heart of our sense of self today? In part at least, it's our reason. And so *mental* illness has perhaps replaced physical illness as the leprosy of our information society. When we are depressed, when we fall into addiction, when we are overwhelmed with anxiety or grief we too withdraw from others, and others from us. Even friends and family may withdraw from us because we are hurting and they don't know what to say or do. And so they can feel helpless, useless. And pretty frustrated. They fear that their empathy for us only brings them down with us. And we who feel like lepers agree. We feel we are not good to be around, that we are contagious. And despite all reminders that it's all in our head, that we just need to get off our pity-pot, in the throws of mental illness we can feel we *are* incurable, not only sick but cursed. After all if it is all in our heads what can we do, get a new head? The brain is the one organ you can't transplant. So what can we do? Run away? But wherever we go, there we are.

When I ran the Honors program at Gonzaga I had a few students come to me every year confiding that they were depressed and could not shake it, that they were battling overwhelming anxiety and losing. Or that they had lost control to alcoholism or anorexia. They scare themselves with impulses to cut themselves, even kill themselves altogether. Now such students would only come to me when they are at their wit's end. Because of course they think they should be able to handle it by themselves. They always have before. And now they want to be a grown up, someone who can take care of themselves. Mental struggle hits them where they live, it does not just hurt, it is humiliating, they feel ashamed in a way they would never feel from a broken leg, or mono.

Now I am not a psychiatrist. But I can help them come to the decision to go to one. I can't cure them but I can be with them when they are afraid no one should get near them. And I can tell them something that they have not lived long enough to know themselves, that they are not alone. That most all of us have suffered from depression, anxiety, addiction—perhaps not as extreme, perhaps not clinically, but enough to be sympathetic to those who are, enough to treat you not like a leper but like kin.

My students would resist the thought of going to a therapist. They had a horror of having to take meds, because they saw it as a sign of failure, and not a particular failure either, but one proving that their entire life was a failure, that they had blown it, before they had hardly started.

Jesus cures the leper through a simple gesture. He reaches out and touches the man. Lepers were to warn people at their approach because they were contagious. But in this story, it is Jesus who is contagious. His holiness and grace overwhelms the victim's defilement and exorcizes the demon that has taken possession of his or her soul. So too with those who feel like lepers today. What can we do? We are not psychiatrists. But we can at least begin the healing process by reaching out to the afflicted, being with them when they feel no one should. And when we ourselves fall into the pit, we can remember not to bat away all help. We may feel like we will simply pull them down too, but those who would be with us in our pain are not alone either, and together, relying on a network of friends and allies, we may well be able to pull ourselves out.

It would be a miracle. But then that's is what Jesus did. Perform miracles. Jesus calls us join him, to be his companions in the creation of the Kin-dom of God