

Tuesday

Scripture - Matthew 8:3 - Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.

Theme - Jesus Touches the Leper

Devotion - In his book Unclean, social psychologist Richard Beck tells us, '...disgust is a boundary psychology that regulates how we think about social borders and barriers.' The Leper who approaches Jesus to ask for healing is risking that Jesus, his disciples, and/or the crowds, will respond to his presence with disgust. Beck reminds us that although there is a scriptural mandate in the Jewish tradition for the isolation of someone with skin disease (see Leviticus 13 for instance), it is part of the human experience to sanction disgust. 'Racists tend to view the despised group as a source of contamination,' Beck writes. So, when a man with leprosy approaches Jesus, this interaction symbolizes healing of much more than a physical ailment. He is healing social boundaries that racialize and then abuse and moral boundaries that shame and then abandon to vulnerability. Compassion and hospitality are not expected for those who are morally disgusting.

Historians tell us that those with leprosy had to engage in particularly shameful behavior when they came into proximity to other healthy people, covering their mouths and shouting, 'unclean.' The danger and subsequent disgust were not only physical contagion. It was also moral. Skin disease was considered a punishment for sin. It showed that God was disgusted by the moral rebellion or inadequacy of the person who was diseased. Jesus should have recoiled. But Jesus does not recoil. Instead, Jesus reaches out to touch the man. BEFORE he has spoken a word of healing Jesus establishes contact with him.

Beck characterizes this as an act of solidarity. Jesus does not distance himself from this physically and morally dangerous, even disgusting person, but draws closer to him. The fact that Jesus touches the man before healing him, according to Beck is not an illustration simply that Jesus can cure the disease. Beck quotes Miroslav Volf who says in his book Exclusion and Embrace, 'these boundaries themselves are evil.' By touching and then restoring to wholeness this man, Jesus doesn't make the man worthy to cross the boundary. He shows that in the Kingdom of God there are no borders that distance, that denigrate, that justify cruelty or violence. Those who follow Jesus heal exclusion, deprecation, and the very material suffering these sins cause in the lives of the children of God wrongly labeled disgusting.

Prayer - When we have been made the leper, the one ignored, silenced, or rejected, we ask for your welcome embrace and your restoration Lord. For the ways we have allowed actively or passively social and moral boundaries that put others down or cast them out, forgive us and restore to us the courage to welcome them, to speak for them, to stand with them.

Wednesday

Scripture - Matt 8:4 - go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded

Theme - Hospitality

Devotion - In yesterday's devotion I made a reference to Leviticus 13 in which we find a religious justification for isolating the leper. If you take a quick second to review this chapter you will also find that it is the priest that has the authority to order someone to isolate and to end that isolation and welcome the leper back. Richard Beck includes this story in a section of his book he titles Hospitality. At the close of our story this week, Jesus tells the once leprous, rejected, isolated, disgusting man to go to the temple. There the priest will find him clean and welcome him back into the community.

Leprosy would have a great many adverse effects on the man and the rest of his family. The emotional trauma to his children and wife as their father and husband must leave. Economic struggle as he is likely the primary breadwinner and now they do not have a stable income to provide food. Lack of proper nutrition negatively impacts proper cognitive development and physical growth affecting the children for the rest of their lives, which will likely be short. The man loses interaction with friends and family and neighborhood, which we all know is particularly painful and even can be harmful. Hospitality then is much more than a kind or friendly gesture, it is the God-established foundation of our well-being as individuals and a community.

Jesus gathers this man back into the hospitable community in which he can be cared for and take his place as one who participates in providing well-being for others. The story challenges us to identify the leper of our time and place. Who is it that is removed from our neighborhood and from our consciousness? What group is characterized as dangerous or disgusting? Who experiences physical, emotional, spiritual lack, and loss but is blamed for their suffering and left unaided? How can we not only practice hospitality with them but advocate that our neighborhood and nation become more hospitable?

Prayer - We are grateful for your welcome that we have experienced in this congregations and community of faith. We are thankful for the welcome that we have offered to others and that you show us how to be a safe space. As discomfoting as it can be continuing to reveal to us those who are rejected and teach us how to make our home with them.

Thursday

Scripture - Matt 8:2 - A man with leprosy came and knelt before him

Theme - Authority

Devotion - The man approaches Jesus and kneels before him. Warren Carter tells us that the Greek word used here (*proserchomai*) refers to a specific kind of approach meant to show proper deference to a ruler or emperor. In other words, the man kneels because he recognizes the authority of Jesus to manifest the presence of God

It is important for us to pause from time to time and interrogate our image(s) of God. How we think about God often unconsciously influences the way we behave toward others. And something special is happening in this story when it comes to the story it tells about God. Jesus comes down the mountain, an image meant to remind us of Moses and the sojourn of the Hebrews in the wilderness. We are told in this week's story that Jesus stretches out his hand, again a phrase used in the First Testament to describe God's liberating activity on behalf of Israel. A liberating activity that at times is described in violent and forceful battle imagery. But in this story, the hand of the Divine is outstretched in healing and restoration, not anger and destruction. The authority of God is not expressed in power over, in the ability to threaten, to destroy, to frighten or intimidate or coerce in this story. God's authority is a border shattering, isolation ending, healing and welcoming power.

When our primary imagery of God is based on taking a few violent stories and images without the balance of images of God that are peaceful and non-violent it is then tempting to use God as a justification of our own violent behavior. Currently, a number of people who identify as Christians are defending the horrific violence employed by a teenager shooting three and killing two protesters in Kenosha Wisconsin. And while I have not interviewed these 'Christians,' I suspect their imagery of God is often wrathful and vengeful. In this week's story Jesus shows us who God is. God is a gentle creator willing to risk the disgust of the crowd to restore one of the rejected to a wholesome community.

Prayer - We lament with sadness the prevalence of anger and violence in our nation today Lord. But we must also confess that as a nation we have celebrated force and profited from weapons and so we ask you to give us a vision of what it means to be peacemakers as we look to you, the Divine healer.

Friday

Scripture - Matt 8:1 - large crowds followed him

Theme - Fear & Risks

Devotion - It is easy to miss just how risky it is that Jesus reaches out to touch the man with leprosy. He has obviously gained a large following based on his preaching. The number of fans and followers provides a degree of safety and security for Jesus not to mention influence. We find verses in which the violent intent of the religious leaders is curbed by their fear of the crowds who are fans of Jesus. But if they see him touch a leper, opening himself to the physical and moral contagion the man possesses, he just might lose many if not all of these followers.

We often see Jesus take these very public risks, not just touching a leper in front of a large crowd, but speaking to Centurions, Samaritans, & women in public. Jesus' ministry is very open. He says so when he is arrested. He has hidden nothing. But the church has often chosen silence. Our history even in America of choosing to say nothing against slavery, racism, lynching, or systemic injustice is a haunting reminder that the simple detail that Jesus' ministry was in public and about social issues has been largely ignored by those who claim to be his followers.

How many times have we heard or used, 'that's not the hill I want to die on.' I don't know the etymology of that phrase but it reminds me that Jesus died on a hill on a cross, a device used to kill those who resisted the social order established by the violence of Rome. Even in our story today, he was not afraid to lose all his followers in order to welcome one leper and make it possible for him to enter once again the wholesome community of God. What hill have I refused to risk my life on? Who is left behind, out, or pushed down because I don't want to take a risk? And what is the hill I would die on?

Prayer - Inspire within us a courageous faith Lord we pray. Forgive us for being silent about your life of love and peace, generosity, and wide welcome. Help us to believe so in your resurrection that we can take a risk for the leper.