

He Was Made Clean

Epiphany 6, Year B

2 Kings 4:(8-17)18-21(22-31)32-37, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1:29-39, Psalm 142

St. David's Episcopal Church, Bean Blossom, Indiana

February 12, 2006

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2 Kings 5:1-15ab

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."

Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

I don't think any of you here has met my brother, Brad. He's about three years younger than I am, and when he was nine months old, he suffered the first of many grand mal seizures that caused severe brain damage. Brad was never able to learn to talk or to take care of himself beyond the basics, but he has certainly learned to express himself and have his needs met.

Now, even though Brad is physically healthy, you know as soon as you meet him that there is something different about him. He walks in this forward-leaning shuffle on the balls of his feet, often with his arms drawn up to his chest. He either doesn't make eye contact, or he stares. He needs help eating and drinking. And when he's nervous or bored or unsure of a situation, he makes this snuffling breathing noise with his soft palate that no one else has ever been able to reproduce, no matter how much I tried when we were kids.

In a town the size of Columbus, a guy like Brad gets to be pretty well-known. My parents and I have both had the experience of being in a restaurant or the mall in Columbus with Brad, and having someone we've never met come up and talk to Brad like a friend – sometimes completely ignoring us -- someone

who has met him through school or one of his other activities. Brad is a part of the fabric of the town, sort of a local institution, and most people have long ago gotten over being frightened or uncomfortable around him.

I can remember, though, being away from home with Brad, being on vacation or just out of town, where people were less willing to look past Brad's idiosyncrasies. One incident in particular has always stayed with me. We were in a restaurant somewhere, and Brad was behaving well but, well, being Brad. A couple at a nearby table had been staring at him and looking disgusted through the whole meal. Finally, the wife said in this stage voice that I know we were intended to hear, "If somebody has something like that, why can't they just keep it at home, instead of bringing it out in public and inflicting it on the rest of us."

I remember how shocked and hurt my parents were. I remember how confused I was, not only that these people thought of Brad as an "it," but that they were willing to cut him off from the rest of the world because they couldn't stand to look at him. It was like they couldn't stand the reminder that there was "something like that" in the same world they lived in. In a very real sense, they looked at Brad as a leper.

Okay, some background: Most scholars now agree that the word that is usually translated "leprosy" in the Old and New Testament is not what we think of today as leprosy: the disease that medicine now calls Hansen's disease. The disease with numbness and degeneration of the extremities – the disease of Father Damien and the Molokai leper colony. It seems instead that this term referred to some sort of skin disease, which seemed to be characterized by white, scaly skin. Maybe something more like what the old commercials used to call "the heartbreak of psoriasis." In fact, the book of Leviticus even talks about walls and garments as being susceptible to their own sort of leprosy, being covered in green or red splotches. Something that sounds a lot like mildew or mold.

But whatever disease we're talking about, for the people of Israel, the most important aspect of leprosy and lepers is that they are unclean. So, what is "unclean"? For us today, the ideas of clean and unclean, the ideas of ritual purity and pollution, these ideas are notoriously hard to translate without getting tripped up by our modern ideas of disease and hygiene. Unclean is not about getting rid of germs, or infection, or preventing food poisoning. And it is usually not about moral judgments on particular objects or animals or activities.

One way that I have read of thinking about ritual purity is that it is a system of managing "the way things ought to be." Look at it this way: Fish are supposed to have fins and live in the sea. So a shellfish that doesn't have fins is not the way it is supposed to be, and is unclean for a good Jew to eat. An oyster is not evil or sinful, just wrong. Blood and other body fluids are supposed to be inside the body, so if they are outside, that must be unclean, even for something as natural as menstruation or childbirth.

It would only be a slight over-simplification to say that the Israelite idea of "unclean" has something in common with the modern slang idea of "gross:"

Those things that make us squirm, that threaten our sense of propriety, that just seem wrong. Those things that we know have to exist in the world, but which we would prefer not to see, and to have as little to do with as possible. In fact, I sometimes hear my teenaged nephews refer to something gross by saying, “that is just so wrong” – as if no further discussion is necessary.

When we watch people on a reality show eat bugs, we know intellectually that people all over the world eat insects. We know that these people will not get sick from eating bugs, but we still squirm to watch it. It’s gross. We may even get physically ill watching. If we knew that our neighbors ate bugs, we might even find it hard to look them in the eye or shake their hand. As the kids say, it’s just wrong, and we don’t want something like that in our world.

Now, Naaman and Elisha know the rules of gross, they know the standards of what is acceptable and what needs to be kept out of site of decent folks. They know that leprosy is at the top of any Israelite gross-out list. They know that lepers are required by law to live out of sight, outside the town walls as long as they are unclean.

But Naaman also thinks he knows what will be necessary for him to be cured. Naaman is a wealthy, powerful man, and he wants the best treatment available for his condition. What’s more, he is willing to travel far and pay well for it. But he also expects a certain amount of show business, of the exotic. He is different from ordinary people, and he expects to be treated differently

What he gets from Elisha, though, is dismissive: Elisha sends a servant out to the front gate to tell Naaman to go wash himself. No audience with the healer, no powders or potions, no incantations, not even special exotic water from far away. Just go wash yourself, like an ordinary person. And Naaman is made clean, just like an ordinary person.

Washing in the Jordan, Naaman is not only cured of his disease, he is cured of his prideful sense of himself as somehow superior. He is brought back into the world of his servants and of his wife’s maid, of ordinary people.

Jesus and the nameless leper of Mark’s Gospel also know the rules. They know that it is inappropriate, even criminal, for a leper to approach another person. They know that for anyone who touches a leper makes himself unclean also, and they know that the final judgment on clean or unclean lies with the temple priests. The leper also believes that Jesus, who teaches with authority and who casts out demons, will be able to cure him.

But what he gets from Jesus is the one thing he could not expect: that Jesus would stretch out his hand and touch him. That Jesus would pollute himself so that the leper will be made clean. That Jesus would treat him like an ordinary person. By that touch, the leper is not only cured of his disease, but he is cured of his painful alienation from the community. He is brought back into the world of ordinary people. He is made clean.

Today, we are more likely to treat a skin disease with antibiotic ointment or hydrocortisone. We, as a society, are really good at patching up our own

physically infirmities and fixing up our visible grossness, or at least we are for those who can afford it or have insurance. We convince ourselves that we have the technical expertise to fix anything, to do away with the ugly, the unclean, the unpleasant.

But in the immediate aftermath of this summer's hurricanes, many of us were shocked and confused when we were forced to look at a group of people we would rather ignore. Here was a whole population of the poor, the excluded, of those who threaten our model of who we are and how things ought to be. Here was a population of invisible lepers we have banished outside the gates of our society.

As a community, we have had the opportunity to show our compassion in helping these people. We have worked hard to find them housing, jobs, food, clothing, to fix and take care of their physical needs. For us, the fixing is the easy part.

The hard part is overcoming our deep fear and loathing of the unclean, the different, the leper, and stretching out our hand to touch those whom we would rather pretend didn't exist in the same world as us. The hard part is actually being willing to put aside our own fear, to be willing to get our hands dirty, to incorporate these people into our life and community in a way so that their different-ness becomes a part of us and ceases to frighten us.

But this is just what we are called to do as members of the body of Christ.

Not to make a world that is perfect, without spot or blemish, without imperfection or uncleanness. But to work toward a world that is whole – whole because it includes the beggar and the celebrity, whole because it includes the clean and the unclean, whole because it includes my brother as well as the people who are disgusted by him.

A world where the leper is made clean, not by medicine or by magic, but where the leper is made clean by the willingness of the people of God to accept him within their gates.