

Jesus Loves You – No Exceptions

Sermon February 15, 2009

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After you've read and listened to the first lesson and the Gospel this morning about cleansing of lepers, what do you think I should be preaching about? (I know, you'll say "10 or 15 minutes"—but I mean, what else?) Shall we think about all the miracles in the bible including the miracles of Jesus', which are told as pointers to or signs of greater truths? Shall we think more about faith and healing? Would it help if we understood disease and modern-day leprosy better? (we even have an expert on diseases of the skin in our congregation.) In commentaries on the Gospel passage I have read interesting discussions on all of these and more.

But I won't go down any of those roads very far this morning, even though all of those topics are interesting and worth studying. When I think and pray and read the lessons in the days before writing a sermon, my mind always goes back to simple thoughts: "how will this help me and the congregation live better? How will this sermon open my heart and head to deepen our commitments to 'love God and love my neighbor' now, in the place where I am and in the bigger world around us?"

So let me move into the Gospel by remembering that this is the day after Valentine's Day. I remember Valentine's Day as far back as kindergarten at Greenwood School in Springfield, Mo. We would bring a shoebox to school and spend part of our time cutting out hearts and pasting them onto this box transforming it into a Valentine mailbox. Then we would all bring a whole packet of those simple Valentine's cards with characters like Scooby Doo saying things like, "Scooby Doo says I love you." The plan was that we carefully put a card in each classmate's valentine box. But then something changed about all that.

In school classes Valentine's Day shifted from being an egalitarian art class into an annual display of crushes and cliques and clusters. Valentine's Day became the day that boundaries between who was popular and who was not was visible to any who looked around the room—those who were in and those who were out.

This tendency to create systems where some are popular and others are left behind is found not only in elementary school classrooms of course. Think about the caste system in India. Apartheid in South Africa. Slavery and Jim Crow in America. Socially condoned, even legally and religiously justified prejudices codified into laws that made it clear to everyone who is in and who is out. What is socially desirable, and who is not.

First century Israel had just such a purity system. It established a spectrum of people ranging from the pure through varying degrees of purity to people on the margin to the radically impure, creating a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.

The rationality of that system in Jewish culture was deep and pervasive, affecting everything, including the religious rituals necessary to bring anyone back into acceptance. It's a long story of its own to describe how all that played out, and perhaps it might seem interesting now only from a scholarly point of view. However, This healing miracle would not have been retained in the Gospels, and kept as a Gospel to be read in the Church during the Epiphany season, if its meaning only related to Jesus' life and time and not also to ours.

What Jesus was declaring then and now does it say to us, that there will be **no outcasts!** No outcasts? An Episcopal banner makes that startling declaration on Massachusetts Avenue on the lawn of St. Dunstan's Church, Bethesda. At the top it says "God Bless You" and then underneath the banner ends with "NO EXCEPTIONS." I saw that sign as I drove down Massachusetts on the way to St. James' on Friday, a route I've taken these four years I've been here. I'd never seen it before and called Jeff McKnight asking if it was going to stay up or was it only for this Sunday because of the Gospel reading. Knowing Jeff and the good people of St. Dunstan's I have a hunch it's up for a long run. IF that is true, there are manifold possibilities, and questions, that open up to be explored.

Over and over again Jesus declared himself for *the* marginalized in society. He was known for *preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives...healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, and forgiving sinners.*

That isn't easy to do. And it is not easy to challenge social taboos, to break through generations-old prejudices that warn us away from people, calling them—even if we have to use euphemistic language to express it—calling them "unclean." So there it is—the challenge for us to live as Jesus did—to talk the talk and walk the walk.

But we had better not end with just that hortatory message. There is something deeper and more personal in the story. The problem with purity laws of any day or age is that there is always someone who is just a little more pure than we are, healthier than we are, more popular than we are, a bit wealthier than we are, better looking, smarter. Deep down, purity laws can only depress us, making us believe that we are not quite good enough just the way we are. The problem with purity laws is that it makes human worth relative—we are only valuable on a pecking order where some get the most Valentines and others get less, and the purity laws dictate that the one who has more is more loved and more valuable—and it is not too far to extrapolate that those with the most are the most blessed by God.

The Gospel story this morning isn't just about sending us out to go look for lepers to heal, but also to realize that we have times we are like the leper in this story. Afraid of the human contact that can lead to scorn or rejection, afraid even to approach Jesus.

And this is where Jesus' breaks through the lie of our purity systems. Jesus loves us even when we are at our most unlovable. Not when we are most good, but when we hurt the most. When we are acting out of our illnesses and pain—that is when Jesus reaches out to each of us saying, "I do choose. Be made clean."

Know today that Jesus loves you. Know today that no matter the disease or isolation you face, you are loved. Know that no purity system, no form of oppression, no hateful words, no lack of Valentines can prevent God from loving you.

For the truth and power of the Gospel is that ***nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. AMEN***