

October 13, 2019

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[Gets down off the pulpit and blows nose loud and long into a tissue; gross wet sounds aplenty. Notices something in a congregant's eye and offers to wipe it out with the horrid tissue. Laughter.]

- What you felt there, that disgust, that recoil you did—that's a natural reaction, to something that was pretty distasteful.
- It's also a healthy fear—y'know the fear that me rubbing your eye with my gross tissue might get you sick.
- **Those feelings were all very familiar to the people of Jesus' time when they would encounter a leper.**

Leprosy is a name that the modern medical community has given to a certain kind bacterial infection that causes nerve damage and damage to flesh and cartilage and all manner of things.

In Jesus' time, what the people originally called "leprosy" was a term that referred to *any* kind of progressive skin condition that didn't clear up. Rashes, legions, discolorations, melanoma, eczema—the people of ancient Judea had no medical understanding of disease, and no way of classifying or diagnosing these kinds of conditions. Two hundred years after the time of Christ, the Greek physician Galen would convince the world that all sickness was caused by poison gas, and it wasn't until more than a *thousand* years after that before our modern understanding of how sickness is spread or what *germs* are even got its *start*.

The people of Jesus' time simply believed that people with skin conditions were "unclean," and that being in the presence of a "leper" would not only affect their flesh, but their souls as well. Standing downwind of a leper, eating with a leper, speaking to a leper, *looking in the direction of* a leper was to be avoided at all costs, and even the thought elicited the same feelings of disgust as my gross tissue.

Now the people of Jesus' time were wrong about the kinds of skin conditions that existed in their time. They weren't dealing with the extremely contagious disease we call leprosy today; I want to make that clear. By and large they were dealing with rashes and infections from poor hygiene practices, and deterioration due to poor nutrition. But they didn't know that. They just knew the feelings a "leper" elicited in them: distaste and fear. These lepers were isolated, exiled from their communities and

forced to live far from “civilized people,” and forbidden from visiting holy sites or taking part in the religious and cultural life of Judea.

There was another group that elicited these feelings of distaste and fear, though for different reasons. They were called Samaritans. Samaritans and Jews had a shared origin, but long ago the two people were split apart by geography and the shifting political landscape, and over generations the two groups began to diverge. When they met again, it was clear to the Jews that the Samaritans had changed. Their opinions on God’s Word and the way they should live were different than those of the Jewish people, and this led to great tensions between the larger, more established people of Israel, and the smaller nation of Samaria.

Just two hundred years before the birth of Jesus, these differences came to a head when Jewish religious leaders led an assault on the Samaritan’s most holy mountain and destroyed their great temple. In the days of Jesus, “tensions” between the two people would be an understatement.

Samaritans, because of their religious and philosophical opinions, were seen as “unclean” in the same way as lepers, and due to the political conflicts between the two people, a Samaritan in or near the land of Judea—or God forbid a Samaritan immigrant—was viewed with a huge degree of hostility. It’s why Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan is such a powerful lesson. But that’s not the Scripture we’re talking about today; we’re talking about a different Samaritan. A Samaritan leper.

Ooh, that is not a good thing to be in the land of Judea. You’re not just unclean, you’re the uncleanest of the unclean. You are doubly disgusting, in the eyes of God and man. If only you were just a leper. If *only* you were just a Samaritan. The man in our Scripture reading from Luke is *both*.

One day, as Jesus was entering the land of Judea, he encountered a village of lepers, outcasts on the very fringes of society. (I’d like to point out, as well, that based on the geography of where Jesus was operating at the time, he would have had to go *way* out of his way in order to pass through this area.) As he entered this village, ten lepers approached him.

They would have been mostly Jewish—though based on their diseases the religious authorities might have debated just “how Jewish” they really were—but one of them happened to *also* be a Samaritan. The lepers had apparently heard of Jesus and his miracle work, and they asked him to have mercy on them.

And instead of ignoring them, recoiling from them, or rejecting them, Jesus—in a very un-flashy and matter-of-course kind of way—cleansed them and sent them back to society, cured of the “unclean-ness” that had forced them out.

As they were leaving him, a new lease on life as they returned to their homes and their people and their way of life, one of them turned back. The Samaritan leper. The uncleanest of the unclean. And he praised God. He thanked Jesus and he praised God for God's healing work in the depths of his hopeless situation.

And Jesus *noticed* that this man was the one who was praising God. He noticed that even moreso than the other lepers, this Samaritan leper *realized* that God was at work.

This outcast of outcasts, this oppressed among the oppressed was cleansed, and his immediate response was to give glory to God.

Because he recognized something we don't always take to heart.

He recognized that healing the *pain* and the *brokenness* of people that is ignored or rejected by others *is the work of God*.

Think about all the times Jesus showed God to us by doing just that work. He cured a Roman soldier's slave, he removed devils that were driving men insane, he cleansed a woman who couldn't stop bleeding—just imagine what the religious authorities had to say about how “unclean” they thought she was—he healed blind beggars and foreigners and the most downtrodden of society, uplifting them and giving them an opportunity for fullness of life and a place in community. He embraced them when no one who was *anyone* would even look at them. He showed God's love to people society would only force out.

Even the Samaritan lepers.

Every time we ignore, reject, exile, belittle, or cause harm—either by action or inaction—to someone or a group of someones who are marginalized, minimized, dehumanized, disenfranchised, oppressed, excluded, alienated, brutalized, underserved, or even just misunderstood... we are getting in the way of God's work.

And every time we perform an act that heals the wounded, uplifts the downtrodden, welcomes the exiled, or mends the rifts between human beings we are taking part in God's work. We are showing that we learned the same lesson as this leper: that healing the *pain* and the *brokenness* of people that is ignored or rejected by others is the work of God.

The people of Judea in Jesus' time let fear and distaste dictate their actions. They let distaste for the Samaritans dictate how they would treat foreigners who deep down were like them just with different perspectives and cultural experiences—which are supposed to be a source of beauty and perspective not disgust and distrust.

And they let fear dictate exactly how they would treat lepers. Fear of the unknown and fear of what they thought they knew. And of course more disgust.

Think about all the times those kinds of fear or distaste have influenced your actions, words, or the opinions you hold in secret.

There are things to be afraid of, sure, fear is a defense mechanism God wrote into our DNA to protect us—You're supposed to not want to rub my snotty tissue all over your mouth for fear you might get sick if you did.

But think of all the times in your life when your fear was misplaced. When your disgust was unfair. When those instincts were wrong and because of them you failed to do God's work or even actively opposed it.

All our lives are full of those moments. We like to think we get better as we get older or wiser, but I can tell you it doesn't always work that way.

Now, think of all the times in your life where your distaste and distrust might be misplaced now. Think of how you might be like the people who looked at lepers and Samaritans *not* with a spirit of love.

How do we get from being the people of Jesus's Judea to being *Jesus* in that story?

Someone who truly takes part in God's healing, uplifting, liberating, and loving work? Well to do that I think we have to take a detour.

I think before we can be ready to learn from Jesus we have to be ready to learn from that Samaritan leper. That Samaritan leper, that worst of the worst—or what he really represents: that most oppressed of all the oppressed...

That Samaritan leper was the one who most quickly, most readily, and most wholeheartedly recognized God's hand, God's *work* in even a single act of uplifting, of welcoming, of reconciling and mending. Of radical inclusion and risky, fearless love *in spite of* distrust, distaste, or popular opinion.

And we can hear those words from preachers or commentators or after school specials, and we can START to believe it, and start to say things like “in an ideal world” or “if only things were different” or “in theory...” But hearing about it or reading about it even in the Bible isn't enough to really get it into our *souls*. If that were all it took humanity would have ended war and abuse and persecution and solved world hunger a long time ago.

What it takes is empathy. What it takes is actually learning from the wisest person in our passage from Luke today. What it takes is trying to see the world the way a Samaritan leper sees it.

Or a poor family fleeing a wartorn homeland.

Or a gay teen watching half of society try to legislate their existence while the other half tries to get rid of them.

Or an abuse victim dragged through the press and the court of public opinion while their abuser is showered with sympathy.

Or a homeless person suffering from PTSD who can't find the support they need and even the benches they try to sleep on have spikes built into them to keep *their kind* away.

That Samaritan leper knew immediately and intimately that the work of God, the kingdom of God that Christ came to lead us to, the *Way of Jesus* is lined with acts of healing, of encircling; of liberating the oppressed, uplifting the downtrodden, mending the broken, and welcoming the exiled home.

And until we can see through the eyes of those the world has ground beneath its boot-heel, we will never truly be on the side of Jesus...

Only then—only when we are able to do that—will we be able to see God like that Samaritan leper did.

I want to see God like that. I want to find out what that God can do through me.

Don't you? Amen.