

Sermon for Epiphany 6B  
February 12, 2012

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St. James the Less

The presence of God, the quality of it, the experience of it, that is revealed to us today in these lessons, particularly the OT and gospel, is that of God's mercy/compassion. Yes they are about healings, and the healings of leprosy, a dreaded, socially isolating and gruesomely distorting of a physical body. But as pointed out last week, we are able to perceive the effect of the reality called THE GOSPEL – healings in these instances, and looking into that effect we see IT more, better, deeper with clarity. What we see is that the very essence of God's presence with us is a reality of compassion or mercy.

That is the presence that is beckoning for our attention, and inviting us to see contemplate how we might bring that into our hearts and minds, our circumstances and actions, our life and the lives of those we encounter in our daily, weekly living.

The reality of MERCY-LOVE is what I have come to call it over the years. There are two things to see in mercy-love:

1. that it always creates a union, a bond among those touched by it.
2. that it has a real-life healing effect, specifically as one's spirit draws from that well-spring of peace, love and newness of life.

Several years ago, right at Christmas time, Keith, a 39 year man was playing tennis, went to the sideline, and when his friends came over he told them he was not feeling well. He suffered a major heart attack. He was literally just minutes away from St. Mary's hospital, and they were able to get him there and do everything medically possible to keep death away, and from there he went to MCV. His beautiful wife, and three young children, his parents, both divorced and re-married, his brother and wife and children, his parents second spouses and their children, the tennis community of Richmond, the members of his church and the clergy of churches which support all of the above – all gathered around Keith and one another.

In the days and months that followed, Keith's room in MCV held an amazing reality. Walking down that fearful sterile hallway through the critical care unit was always an unsettling journey, but crossing the threshold into his room was like moving into a warm embrace, despite machines and IV's and beeps and monitors. Even the medical care professionals were different in there. Your soul could feel the communion of souls, the love and tenderness among one another, the ability to say the deep things, and the holding up of each one by another, including Keith's holding up the rest of us.

There was the effect of THE GOSPEL, God's presence as MERCY-LOVE. There was that truth, that strength, that hope, that power which touches these lepers in the days of scripture, and which is just as real and available for us to live in, and to live out of now.

Our biblical accounts hold two interesting models for us to consider about how MERCY-LOVE beckons to enter us. Maybe you are not feeling a kinship with a leper at this time in your life. Great! But maybe each of us knows one(s) who deals with events/conditions/situations which chronically plague, which bring the loneliness of feeling isolated if not abandoned, which bring dis-eases and dis-at-ease-ment.

I find the tenderness of this scene between the man with leprosy and Jesus so compelling. I see it as a real model of MERCY-LOVE well received. Obviously leprosy is a life-changer. And I think it obvious that this man has lived with it for a while. He does not come across to me in the panic-mode of a person who has just diagnosed, just become aware of something that is a life-changer. Instead (and I know I am projecting here) he seems more likely to be one who has had this different-than-what-anyone-would-want-situation in his life for a while. He is not in a panic. He is not overwhelmed with the shock, the anxiety or the self-pity that can easily be when such a sorrow hits.

This seems to contrast with Naaman. He is an important person in the world, in his world, and obviously in his mind. He too has this dreaded and fatal disease. But he is a man of action and a man who is an attacker, one who is used to a mind-set of going and getting what one wants, using everything – including connections – to get it. He too wants release from his leprosy. In his movements and actions, I can hold a sympathy certainly, but I sense a skepticism, or a “oh, lets’ try it and see” – like its just another avenue to try. I see him as a person trying everything reasonable, seeking to get control over his condition, his situation. He is a man of action.

The scene of Naaman’s healing is quite different from that of the kneeling leper. Naaman wants to be received by Elisha with respect accorded to his accomplishments, office and title and letters of recommendation. Naaman is a proud man, rightly so by most all standards, and wants to be treated with respect for his office.

Now Naaman is going to experience the cure of his leprosy too. But though he was cured, I wonder if he was healed. There is a world of difference between the two in my experience and in my understanding.

I have been with those who are healed, and yet in the eyes of the world they lose their battle; they die. I have been in the midst of those who are cured, but not healed, not changed. Some theologians point out the difference between the two as the difference between the bringing forth of Lazarus from the grave, and the resurrection of Jesus in the garden.

Lazarus is given more life. It easily could be called a resuscitation from a medical-scientific point of view. He most probably became a much more thankful person. But is there newness of life? It is interesting to see that at times those with a similar experience become ridden with anxiety, as they know that life is terminal; they will not escape death. Their life as they know it is the most important thing, and because

they have a heightened sense of having little control over its end, worry about the future becomes an over-riding burden.

But then there are others that come back from death into the fullness of life changed. Recalling one parishioner, Marjorie, she described to me her death, and the journey into the Light and Peace, and then the jolt back into her earthly body. Crossing the divide, and returning brought into her a peace and depth, that in her life turned up her creative juices, and yes, also made her less patient with the idiocies of small thinking by those around her. Year later, when she faced into the diagnosis which would lead her into her death, she was sad, but there was no fear; there was mainly the desire that she would be treated in dying with dignity, and there was also the desire to have those around her know her love and appreciation.

Resurrection – newness of life - is different from resuscitation – the opportunity for more living, so deeply pictured in the scene of Mary Magdalene beholding Jesus at the grave, and seeking to hold onto to her Rabboni, rather than perceive Him as her Risen Lord. She kept her eyes upon what was, and had to be all but scolded: “Do not hold onto me.” Release the past, behold the new – witness to the resurrection.

The leper who is the kneeler is, for me, a precursor of this. He gives me more insight, and encouragement too. And prescription. He has managed to not let his thinking mind be in charge. If his thinking mind were in charge, he would be more like Naaman, relying on he who is in the eyes of the world, and he would be figuring things out and seeking to control the situation – which may or may not be possible, but mostly he would be tied to his ego-needs, and body- needs rather than the deep, deep needs of his very soul.

The kneeler’s approach to being in the presence of the Healer is qualitatively different. His actions and words are different. After he kneels, he says: “If you choose, you can make me clean.” He is not principally asking for the rotting flesh to be removed or restored; he is asking for the deeper reality, of being cleansed. To be washed of the deposit of his past life, to be unleashed from its bondage of isolation and loneliness, to be freed from the dis-ease defining his identity, his life.

The lessons here: The path into the MERCY-LOVE of God is perhaps different for each. And it is certainly true that the invitation to receive it, to witness it, to participate in it is for all. But experiencing the fullness of the GOSPEL is coming into a new thing, where our conditions and situations and diseases become like the cross, opening our very souls into a whole new life, healed, forgiven, renewed, and in MERCY-LOVE.

That is why every church gathered in Jesus’ name is about feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, assuring the dying, comforting the grieving, forgiving one another of the past, surrendering the present, and seeking the next step through a clean heart that receives Jesus’ love and compassion. We “do” a lot about all of that. And our greatest offering underneath and through all of it just may be in our seeking to

be kneelers, humbly opening to MERCY-LOVE. Let us be so moved, as is Christ Jesus our Lord.