

6 Epiphany – Year B – February 15, 2009
2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45
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I had an interesting conversation with an artist last month. After complimenting her on her work, she laughed self-consciously and confessed that for each finished piece, there are many hours spent re-painting or re-fashioning. She is not alone. When great works are carefully restored, they are often found to have been significantly re-worked. Artists often talk about the creative process like the months of hidden growth of pregnancy and then the birth of the child. That working out of the final pattern of brush or finger strokes that are lovingly woven into coherence through light and dark, color and texture, shape and perspective, is like the movement of a pattern of great beauty from inside the artist to its external expression.

Last week we discovered Jesus' response to God in His disciplined life of prayer. Jesus has left Capernaum with a renewed clarity of mission, to share the Good News throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, and casting out demons. No doubt, Jesus' reputation precedes Him, such that in today's Gospel lesson we find Him waylaid by a leper in his travels. The leper comes to Jesus, kneels and begs him "If you choose, you can make me clean." These few words alone are quite remarkable. Jesus' response is also quite extraordinary. However, on reflection it is entirely characteristic of the Word made flesh, God incarnate, and reveals yet another aspect of God's graciousness that you and I can choose to practice here and now.

Let's get a grasp of why it was remarkable for the leper to come close to Jesus – close enough for Jesus to touch him. Why it was notable that he even spoke to Jesus, and why what the man says to Jesus is like an alarm bell calling you and me to action today. In Jesus' day, leprosy could mean anything from what we now call Hansen's disease to any number of skin disorders described as reddish-white diseased spots or raw flesh. The diagnostic details are given in the Book of Leviticus, and so is the priestly pronouncement on anyone who is leprous: "The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' ... He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:45-46). That meant that he or she could not go to the synagogue or to the Temple to worship God. Being pronounced leprous means that all contact with family and community is revoked and the person is expelled from the city, exposing them to great danger outside of the protection of their community and the safety of the city walls. In a culture that is highly oriented around family, relationships and community, the treatment of those considered unclean was tantamount to physical, spiritual, and psychological torment.

Imagine the courage it took for this leprous man to break all the rules and come over to kneel before Jesus and in great faith ask of Him one thing. "If you choose, you can make me clean." Notice that the leper does not ask Jesus for healing. He asks Jesus to be made clean. In that one word, we know a great deal about the importance of relationship and community in the day-to-day life of this man and most Judeans. In that one word we learn just how much has been taken away from him because of his leprous condition. Such was the importance of purity or ritual cleanliness in the Judean culture that this man's whole life is suspended in the scales of judgment. In being made clean, he stands to regain his status, and have his dignity and honor restored within the community. In touching this man, Jesus makes Himself ritually unclean and risks His own life. For now, let's put ourselves in the place of the leper. His desperation has driven Him to fall before Jesus and beg for cleansing. In our mind's eyes, we too are kneeling on the dusty road in a deserted place. What thoughts and feeling are swirling through your mind? How long is it since you were denied the most fleeting stroke of physical contact? Now watch as Jesus' hand moves towards you. Feel the warmth of His touch, the roughness of his fingers as they gently press against your cheek, and the strength of His hands as you

yield, leaning forward into his healing arms. Then hear the power of Jesus' words liberating you from the bondage of disease and isolation, "I do choose. Be made clean!" For you and me, for this lonely and rejected man, the power of Jesus' cleansing touch is a miracle. It is an explosion of divine compassion and mercy, blowing away the painful reality of sickness and fear, bursting open the wall of desperation, loneliness and longing. Jesus' cleansing is like the work of a master artist, restoring this man's presence and image in and to the world to the beauty of physical, spiritual and social wholeness. God has never left the man; their relationship was not broken by lesion or isolation. Jesus harnesses the movement of this man's faith, to heal and restore him to full relationship with his community. In this act of compassionate touch and healing, Jesus shows you and me a radically new attitude in the way we are to care for others. Jesus shows how the man's disease is no barrier to God's infinite grace and love, and that we too should not allow anyone to be separated from the love of community.

We live in a world that promotes individualism above relationships and community, and seems to equate bodily perfection with success. We also live in a world that seems strangely embarrassed by its self-created and self-inflicted dis-ease. With these values as the prevailing moral compass, there is perhaps unsurprisingly widespread outrage over executive compensation on Wall Street, or who exactly is going to be paying for Nadya Suleman's fourteen children. Yet there is hardly a whisper or click of billions in electronic fund transfers that could eradicate a significant proportion of suffering in the two-thirds world. Where is the blazing fury over the fact that millions of children die annually from entirely preventable diseases? It is a sad day when we value pieces of paper with pictures of dead Presidents on them more than the life of a single child of God.

As Spirit-empowered followers of Jesus, you and I are His servants and leaders. We serve God and neighbor in order to lead each other forward towards God. A few moments ago, we experienced what it felt like to be the leper kneeling before the face of Christ. You and I are bearers of the face of Christ to the rest of the world - both near and far. We carry with us our unique story of the Good News of Jesus' salvation and healing. Even though we are far from perfect, we are strengthened and supported by the love and blessings of this community. God's hand is at work in you and me re-shaping our hearts and minds to greater depths of inner beauty, revealed to the world through us in the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit. Our transformation to Christ-likeness makes each of us a work in progress. Part of that transformation comes in examining the shadows within and without. The Gospel story today compels each of us to ask God's help in revealing who the leper is my life and yours. God's radical hospitality and desire for all to be reconciled and restored to wholeness means that we too must offer ourselves to the one we would rather send away or lock out of our lives. As members of the Body of Christ, you and I are the hands of Jesus, reaching out to touch the leper in our midst. Our ministry of servant leadership is to help others know and experience their infinite worth in God's sight, and restore all with dignity as beloved children of God. When we welcome all without judgment back into the loving embrace of God's community, you and I are privileged to share the miracle of healing.

It is a simple truth that the artist cannot create the picture, the sculpture or any work of art without getting involved. As our children and youth know from the clay prayer pots they are making in preparation for Lent, we have to get our hands dirty to create and restore. As Henri Nouwen puts it, "no one can help anyone without ... entering with [our] whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt [or] wounded...." The more we choose to bring Christ's gracious compassion and healing touch to the world, the more we are revealing God's beauty in and through your life and mine.

Amen.