

Sermon 10/9/2022

Psalm 111

Luke 17:11-19

I imagine the ten lepers robotically, in single file, plodded away after Jesus told them to go to the priests, to confirm that they were clean. Upon first reading this, I thought why do they need external validation? Why do they need someone else to tell them that their skin is cleared? Any teenager who looks in the mirror and is much relieved that their humiliating zit is gone doesn't need a priest to tell him/her it is healed, they would know it.

Whenever I am asked to give a lay sermon, I look at the gospel with a fine tooth comb. Paulo usually asks us six weeks in advance and believe me, I use every bit of that time thinking and writing and writing and thinking about that Sunday's lectionary. Often the gospel and Jesus' parables can seem difficult to understand or downright confusing. And for this sermon, my gnawing question was: "Why go to the priests to have their cured leprosy confirmed?" Couldn't they have checked their bodies themselves or used an at home leprosy test, wait 15 minutes to see where the pink line showed up—on the C or the T?

A brief question to Paulo revealed something of which I was quite unaware, maybe most of you know this, I did not. He set me straight. The priests were the Public Health Dept. of their day. They had no scientific knowledge, no research data on contagious diseases. In those days, sinfulness and disease were not separate, disease was merged into a stigma of sin, shame, and uncleanness.

If you want to view the rules that priests followed to allow the lepers back into their society, check out the book of Leviticus, Leviticus is called the Priests' Manual. Here you will find explicit rules and guidance to determine if one was "clean" or not. The priests job was to keep the community safe and well from disease, disease that could potentially wipe out a village. Think the CDC.

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The answer to contagion was quarantine, not much different from today's contagion policy except today many privileged persons can be quarantined while fed, entertained with books, cell phone, computer, and TV. A leper colony, not a community but called a colony—was outside the village, distanced from family and friends, in squalid condition, no comforts, no medical care, no one from the outside.

Since March 2020, we read Luke's story of the ten lepers with an experienced and deeper meaning than before. I have heard the term "BC" meaning Before Covid— in context of the last two and a half years. So what happens when someone has an incurable disease with no medical profession available and cast off to a leper colony? They are an outcast. A social stigma of sin and uncleanness is placed on the victim. Another instance of "blame the victim" when sometimes the only sin committed was being part of a community, being connected. It is quite a paradox.

Fortunately, quarantine is not the sledge hammer treatment as it was in the biblical leprosy colonies. Nor do we have the extreme policy of quarantine as China has had. And early in the Covid pandemic, physical distancing was effective.

Last week, on my way to an appointment at MGH, I stopped dead in my tracks as I passed a display from the archives of the MGH Museum of Health. There, on the wall was a variety of 20th century public health posters pertaining to Tuberculosis, Polio, and HIV. The eye catching collection of large public health warnings dated from 1934 to as late as the 1990's Star Wars characters.

I had a visceral reaction to a 1936 Public Health poster that I had never seen before. Bold black letters: TUBERCULOSIS above a drawing of an adorable Gerber baby wearing a cute pink ruffled dress and a bib, with words printed on the bib "Don't kiss me!" And under the sweet Gerber

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baby drawing were the words “Your Kiss of Affection The Germ of Infection.” In other words, be safe by disconnecting, avoid physical touch.

I was suddenly flooded with memories of my grandmother. Grandma McMurray contacted tuberculosis when she was a young mother in the 1920's. All but one of her four sisters suffered from TB. For medical treatment and to keep the contagion from spreading, my grandmother was in and out of a tuberculosis sanatorium. When her TB symptoms of coughing up blood, weakness, and fatigue became too severe, she had to leave her own children for months at a time.

I grew up with this grandmother physically distanced from me and my brothers, and never a kiss. She wore a protective mask much of the time. Our distanced relationship, although only a forty minute drive, consisted of cards, letters, and an occasional visit. My brothers and I waved to her from the manicured lawn of the TB Sanatorium, squinting up at her window in the bright Colorado sun, to see her waving back from her third floor sanatorium room. She died of TB when I was sixteen.

I don't recall ever sitting on my grandmother's lap nor feeling a loving touch from her thin emaciated body. I can't imagine the pain she felt, so isolated from her two daughters, her sons-in-law, and her six grandchildren and from the world. She was disconnected from us and we from her. But I know that she was not disconnected from God. I treasure the white leather bound bible she gave to me one Christmas. It has a zipper to keep the pages safe and untattered and the zipper pull is a clear marble with a mustard seed inside. She was known to have the faith of a mustard seed.

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Trauma is a chronic disruption of connectedness, either a disconnect within yourself, disconnect between you and your environment, or a disconnect between you and others. Or all of the three. Overarching can be a disconnect from God.

When we lose connection to others and no longer belong to a community, we lose a sense of who we are and, in the case of the leper colony, a sense of purpose and meaning. And, the community loses a member.

Today's scripture is truly a story of disconnection and then reconnection. I want to slow down and freeze frame this scene of ten lepers and Jesus' healing. It is so easy to gloss over the scripture clues.

To understand this story is important to understand the effect that leprosy had on the communities and the individuals. And for that matter many reasons in our world for disconnected communities. This kind of isolation is ripe for trauma symptoms.

Core beliefs— "I am unlovable, I am unworthy," become one's identity—"I am undeserving—of anything."

Under these conditions, the nervous system goes into survival mode. It goes beyond the fight flight response, they can't fight the disease, they can't flee the colony, they can not flee their bodies, there is a numbing. a dissociation, disconnection, the person is in the freeze response.

So what is different about Sam from the other nine? I'll call the tenth leper "Sam." He shouldn't be identified by his disease, he was much more than a leper. I have been trying to walk in his thirsty dusty sandals for the last 6 weeks.

Sam, the one from Samaria, was hated by the Jews, considered neither a Jew nor a gentile. He was a foreigner.

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The gospel notes that the ten lepers were cured as they obediently walked toward the priest. But Sam was different.

I don't think he just turned around and repented. This is where my mind's camera goes slow motion into a freeze frame. First he slowed down, took in the situation, he paused. Pauses are necessary, just as pauses in music are necessary. He noticed something on the inside.

He turned back toward Jesus, away from the others' direction.

Years ago I taught Sunday School to 5th graders. Repentance was the topic on this particular Sunday. The exercise was to show how one repents by turning back. You can imagine a room full of 5th graders loudly ordering each other and yelling out orders to each other "Repent!" It became a chaotic game of Simon Says, whipping their bodies around in the opposite direction as fast as they could, their arms flailing as empty jacket sleeves, whacking each other as they turned. I'm not sure where repentance landed that day.

Sam wasn't doing a Sunday School exercise of repentance. This was a real deal and with the man himself—Jesus.

Imagine yourself toward a destination or a goal and you sense something inside, a strong body sensation to turn around. A whole body experience. As as you slowly turn around, you begin to see with a new perspective. Like turning a large cargo ship around, you have time to observe what is around you, you become curious, taking in the landscape and in so doing gaining a wider perspective, maybe noticing a different vista—richer, greener, with complexity.

The turning back was not externally motivated, no one told him to turn back. Yes, the skin deep leprosy was cleared, but what was happening inside his body, inside his nervous system? He sensed a transformation

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from the inside. Sam regained a voice, once silenced as a sinner and an outsider. He no longer distanced himself, he became physically close to Jesus, he looked Jesus in the eyes. He connected.

Sam was more than cured of leprosy. Sam was coming out of the trauma vortex, no longer quarantined to an isolated colony. He came back a changed man and Jesus knew this when He spoke "Your faith has healed and saved you." From the inside out. Jesus knew it and Sam felt it, an inside job where he embodies his faith.

I have had the honor of witnessing some mental health clients come back from trauma, traumas of war, violence, childhood abuse, car accidents. Comments like "Is that picture new?" as one client gazed at a framed print on my office wall, it had hung there for years.

"No, it has been there since before you started coming to therapy," I respond with a smile. I get an understanding nod and smile in return. This client knew that he was coming back to feeling alive and alert.

Other comments:

"I feel like I've had cataract surgery, I haven't, but colors seem to be clearer."

"I'm starting to notice sensations in my body, maybe I really was pretty numb."

"I can see farther and wider."

"I'm not so afraid anymore."

"I have started to attend church."

"I have begun to pray again."

These comments often describe what it is like to come out of trauma, there is a sense of expansiveness, peripheral vision, noticing details of one's environment. There is less rigidity of the body and mind. Able to hold more than one viewpoint. What was once an either/or, black or white,

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turns to tolerating gray areas—the ability to tolerate uncertainty. This is what happens when we come out of trauma. This is our brain on God....

There is a connected relationship between trauma and spirituality. Out of the depths of traumatic events and suffering comes transformation. It doesn't necessarily mean we need to have profound trauma to experience a transformation. Some people begin to feel a wholeness and self-compassion. "I feel whole; I feel connected; I feel alive." Joy from the inside— deeper than skin.

The functional Ventral Vagal State is where one feels connected to themselves from within, connected to the environment, **and** connected between self and others. All three.

Carl Jung, Swiss psychiatrist and son of a Swiss Reformed Christian pastor, who lived through two World Wars, believed that there is a collective consciousness that we share. Jung writes:  
"Belief or reason alone does nothing to move the soul: without feeling, religious meaning becomes a vacant intellectual exercise. This is why the exuberant spiritual moments are emotively laden."

Faith is not an intellectual exercise, it is a whole body experience.

And Peter Levine, the developer of Somatic Experiencing, says: "The essence of religious experience is an act of feeling the animating force, the *spiritus* within the lived encounter...it is not surprising that they also encounter aspects of religious awe."

When we focus inward and become curious about our inner sensations, we allow ourselves to experience a subtle inner shift and a sense of openness. We may notice this internal sensation when we are in the

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present moment at prayer, at communion, in deep conversation with another. Or seeing the full moon rising last night!

What happens if we focus inward, not narcissistically, but with open curiosity? We can become expansive and look outward with compassion. Of course the Samaritan was able to witness the profound transformation as described in Luke in just nine verses. But we can all start small, we can begin to notice and mindfully check in when we are feeling expansive, joyful, and connected to ourselves, to others, and/or to our environment. And to God.

In closing, let me ask you what significant turning points have you had? Were they externally prompted or were those turning points internally God guided? The Book of Job says: *“for in my flesh, I shall see God.”*

In community we are met, not with silence but with a “call and response” as we do in worship. Someone is there to meet us, to answer us, to respond to us. We had a pause during Covid and we are slowly returning to our community. To those who have not yet returned to ACC and are able and physically well, I say, stick your toe in the water and feel how precious connection on the inside, the outside, and the space between can be.

May it be so.

Peter A. Levine, PhD, (2010) In An Unspoken Voice, *how the body releases trauma and restores goodness*.



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