

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of *our* hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, *our* strength and *our* Redeemer. *Amen.*

As a child in Sunday School I heard Bible stories about leprosy, and people who came to Jesus to be healed from it. I didn't have any idea what it was, only that it was something bad. Two thousand years after Jesus lived, it was obvious even to a little child like myself that if you were a leper you were not welcomed or even accepted by other people. It wasn't until decades later that a study of Leviticus helped me understand why.

Leviticus is where we find the ancient holiness code, the laws designed to protect the cleanliness and therefore the holiness of God's chosen people, laws that we rarely pay any attention to these days unless we're looking for a way to condemn someone else's behavior. That's a sermon for a different day, but today I want to share with you what Leviticus and the holiness code have to say about leprosy. Leviticus Chapter 13—all 59 verses of it—speak specifically about “scale disease,” a variety of skin ailments that were collectively referred to as leprosy. Leviticus 13 provides for every possibility when dealing with the disease, leaving practically nothing to chance. The bottom line is that a person suspected of having leprosy was to be examined by the priest and if that examination revealed particular signs or symptoms, the leper was to be pronounced unclean. If that wasn't bad enough, verses 45 and 46 say that:

“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 remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

A leper was ostracized and outcast, separated from family and friends—shamed. Once the priest declared the person unclean, the leper's life changed drastically. Unless there was a reversal of the disease, life would never be the same again. It was a hopeless situation.

Today's lessons present two men, separated in time by hundreds of years but each facing the stigma of his disease. The differences between them are significant. One was an important and powerful man; the other a person whose name isn't even mentioned. Mark gives us little information about the leper in today's Gospel lesson—merely that he came to Jesus begging him. We assume the man was an outcast, declared unclean by the local priest. As we're reminded in Leviticus, often lepers lived “outside the camp” and begged at the city gates during daylight hours. This man likely had no connections, just a lot of nerve that was probably fueled by his desperation. He had no doubt heard stories of Jesus going around the countryside, proclaiming the gospel, casting out demons and healing many who were sick—making clean those who were unclean. His plea was simple and straightforward: “If you choose, you can make me clean.” He had everything to gain and nothing to lose.

Naaman, on the other hand, was on the brink of losing everything. He was a military hero with connections in powerful places and he didn't mind using those connections, but it was through the lowest of the low that he heard how his leprosy might be cured. A young slave girl, captured from Israel in Naaman's own military victory, told of the power of the Samaritan prophet. Through his relationship with the King of Aram, Naaman pursued his cure, although a series of missteps threatened to prevent it. The King of Aram sent Naaman—bearing gifts—with a letter to the King of Israel, whose own army had been defeated by the king who was now asking for a favor. With good reason, the King of Israel was suspicious and skeptical that the King of Aram would ask him to “play God,” that is, to cure a man's leprosy.

It's ironic that the King of Israel didn't know about Elisha, the man of God who resided in his own country and who did have the means to cure Naaman's leprosy. But Elisha refused to see Naaman, instead sending a messenger with instructions about how to effect the cure by washing seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman was angry and insulted by the snub, and also at the simplicity of the prescribed cure. He wanted *his* healing to be dramatic, showy, and powerful—befitting someone as important as he was. His rage was so intense that he walked away. He had

no intention of trying what Elisha recommended until his own servants persuaded him. When he finally did give in, of course he was healed.

Despite the significant differences between the two men in today's lessons, they are connected across the years by God's healing mercy. Their stories offer us a strong and powerful testimony and we could very easily stop there, simply rejoicing in the magnitude of God's power and grace. But the scriptures call us to go deeper, to find and explore other lessons that await us beneath the surface.

We can begin by looking more closely at Naaman's story. Because of his power and social standing, he chose to work through "channels" and tried to use his network of connections to facilitate his healing. In fairness to Naaman, that method was probably all he knew; but it didn't work with God. Both the King of Israel and the prophet Elisha were insulted by Naaman's actions: the first, the King of Israel, because Naaman presumed him to be what he was not, and the other, Elisha, because Naaman held himself in such high esteem that he expected his healing to be grand and special. God's love for us and God's generous mercy and grace to us is freely given regardless of who we are—or who we *think* we are—good or bad, weak or powerful. God loves us because we're God's own children. Naaman learned the hard way that God's grace is not something to be earned, through either actions or position. But he also learned it cannot be bought. Ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, ten sets of garments: that's a lot of loot! But it didn't help Naaman one bit.

Naaman had to get past himself, beyond his assumptions and perceptions of himself and others, and also beyond his own expectations, to find what God could and would do for him. Naaman was himself insulted that the healing he sought so desperately would come from an action as simple as immersing himself seven times in the Jordan River. He even resisted it because it was so easy. He didn't understand that all God asked of him was faith in the outcome. Receiving God's grace is never as complicated as we try to make it be. To open ourselves to relationship with God and all the blessings that come from that relationship, we need only to remove the obstacles that we ourselves have put in the way: our doubts, suspicions, false pride, false perceptions of ourselves and others...

When we pull down those walls that we ourselves have erected, we can be open to receive God's healing and love through some unlikely sources, just as Naaman did. If Naaman had not been vulnerable, he might have completely ignored the hope offered by the slave girl he had captured in Israel. And without the encouragement of his own servants, he might have walked away in anger from the simple cure that awaited him. Slaves and servants were held in low esteem in Naaman's day. Speaking out was risky for them; but they spoke out anyway. And so did the Leper who was cured by Jesus.

"If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus touched him and said, "I do choose," and the leper was healed. Jesus chooses to heal us from whatever disease we carry, whatever burden weighs us down, whatever stigma keeps us from being whole and healthy and happy. Jesus chose to do that for the leper and chooses to do the same for us. But that is only part of our healing. We, too, must choose; we must choose to let Jesus heal us. That means we must acknowledge that it doesn't matter who we know, or who we are. We must remove the obstacles that keep us from being in right relationship with God. We must be open to see and hear God through the most unlikely sources. And then we must be ready to speak out, first to ask for our Lord's mercy, and then to share with others how our Lord has blessed us.

Following Naaman's healing, we hear in verse 15a that, "Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!" God wants nothing from us—expects nothing from us—except our love and faithfulness, and our praise of God's good works. As the psalmist writes, "You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever." *Amen.*