

Some of us may know that people who had leprosy in the Bible were people that were considered unclean. We may know that people who had leprosy were forbidden from taking part in ritual services because they were considered sinful because they had leprosy. It was assumed that they had leprosy because of something which they had done.

The scripture today is a story when Jesus offers healing to someone that the religious authorities pushed away because they were scared of him. The man had leprosy. An unnamed skin disease. This leper comes to Jesus and begs to be made well. "If you choose, you can make me clean," he says to Jesus.

The translation that we read says that Jesus was moved with compassion. But other ancient texts do not say that Jesus was moved by compassion. Instead, the other ancient texts of the Bible say that Jesus was moved by anger.

Suppose these other ancient texts are correct. Why would Jesus be moved to bring healing out of anger? What would Jesus be so angry about? Could it be that he was so angry because rather than offering healing to this man with leprosy that the religious leaders had devised rules that prevented this man from being healed? And could it be that we Christians today unknowingly try to prevent God from bringing healing to brokenness by some of the ways that we act?

Maya Angelou, well known poet, had given a lecture when a question was asked of her. The questioner stood and said, "Ms. Angelou, tell us something about racism. Do you find it better than it was or worse? Are you more aware of it on the East Coast than on the West Coast?"

She said, "Let me tell you a story." The story she told was this.

She had been in the San Francisco area ten or fifteen years earlier for the purpose of putting on a Public Television show on African art. Before the show was to go on, she had a call from a stranger who said that he happened to have a collection of African statues of some kind which he thought might be very useful to her on this program and perhaps she would like to see them and maybe use them.

Of course, she accepted the offer and saw them. They were indeed just what she wanted. He lent them to her and she used them in her program in very artful ways which were appealing to the man who lent them.

As a result of that, they started a friendship. She got to know the man and his wife. They had dinner together a number of times and got to be really good pals. When the Public Television thing was over, she went back to the East Coast.

A few years later, she returned to the Bay Area and remembering this friendship, she called up the man and said, "It is Maya Angelou. I'm back again. I would love to pick up our friendship where we left it off. I enjoyed you so much before."

He said, "Terrific. Let me tell you a little bit about what I have been doing during the interval." He had been in Europe working with the problems of the American troops stationed over there.

She said, "How did it go?"

He said, "The black troops have a particularly hard time because they are black and there aren't many blacks around. But our boys, also..."

She said, "What did you say?"

He said, "The black troops have a particularly difficult time for various reasons but our boys, also..."

She said, "What did you say?"

A third time she went through it. All of a sudden, as she described it, he, himself, heard what he said and said in effect, "This is the most awful thing I have ever done. I can't continue the conversation. I have got to hang up, to have said such a thing to you, Maya Angelou, 'the black boys, our boys.'"

She said, "No. This is just why we must talk." He hung up. She tried a number of times to get hold of him. Again and again, the calls didn't go through.

Maya Angelou told this story to the audience in San Francisco that had gathered that day to hear her. This was her example of how racism still existed in our culture. She then left the lecture hall.

The next day, Angelou was to give a second set of lectures. As she returned to the podium she told the audience, "I'm sure you noticed that I was moved by what I told you yesterday in answer to your question about racism." Then she said, "A remarkable thing happened as I was leaving the hall. A man in the audience stood up and said, 'Here I am.'"

It was the man she had been talking about. As she said this to this audience, the man himself again rose up, a small, white, Episcopal clergyman as it turned out. He walked up to the platform and threw his arms around Maya Angelou, a large black woman, and she put her arms around him. They embraced one another and they wept.

In telling this story, author and pastor Frederick Beuchner says that what he saw was not only racial barriers come down but so many different kinds of barriers that separate us as human beings -- fear, mistrust, misunderstanding, anger, loneliness, the inability to communicate with each other, even those we love the most and are closest to."

Beuchner says that "In so many ways, we move through our lives like lepers, the untouchable ones, the unclean ones, afraid to touch other people's lives and let our lives be touched by other people, ashamed of our own uncleanness, suspicious of other people."

Jesus was moved by anger to bring healing to a man stricken with leprosy. A man that was shunned out of fear. But in those moments when we learn to set aside our fears we allow space to open ourselves up to God's Holy Spirit.

Did you catch what happened just before this moment when Jesus felt the courage to bring healing to this man and to others that had been shunned? Just before this moment Jesus went off by himself to pray. Maybe what we need to do in our lives is to also set aside time to pray for God's Holy Spirit to overwhelm us as well.

But be careful. Because if we truly allow the Holy Spirit to overwhelm us, to really be touched by the Holy Spirit, we may feel the call upon us to bring healing and restoration to broken people and to our own broken relationships.

We are all lepers. Everyone of us is broken or hurt or lonely or misunderstood or shunned in some way.

It's just sometimes others know it and sometimes we hide it from others.

But Jesus can bring healing and restoration to all of us.

Jesus overcame prejudice to bring healing to the lepers who were shunned by the religious community.

That same Spirit that moved Jesus is the same Holy Spirit that can bring healing to our brokenness. That same Holy Spirit can inspire us to overcome our fears and seek to bring healing to our broken relationships.

Jesus was in the healing business. What is the Holy Spirit inspiring you to heal?
AMEN.

-Buechner, Frederick, "A Moment of Grace," and found at http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/buechner_3601.htm

-Text: Mark 1:39-45

-Given: 2/12/12 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)