

Epiphany 6 B
Mark 1:40-46
February 15, 2009

A couple of weeks ago, a story aired on NPR about Jose Ramirez, a man from Texas who was diagnosed in 1968 with Hansen's Disease – the medical term for what was once called leprosy. Ramirez had suffered throughout his teen years with fevers, running sores, numbness and loss of sensation in his limbs. Doctors had a hard time coming up with a diagnosis. When in despair, his family took him across the border to Mexico, to a traditional healer, the man told young Jose, “you have a disease of the Bible.”

Once he learned he had Hansen's, Ramirez was sent away from home to Carville, Louisiana, to live at the U.S. Public Health Hospital, the only leprosarium in the United States. He was transported there in a hearse, because, as the health department told him, ambulances were for the living. He arrived at Carville, 20 years old, the youngest resident in a community of thousands. He looked around at his new family, at their missing fingers, at their collapsed noses. He felt his hope vanish.

Jose Ramirez had become a leper, in the most Biblical sense of the word. Stripped of his family and friends, locked away from society, and faced with a mysterious, chronic, debilitating disease, he had more in common with the man in our gospel lesson today than with any of his young American peers. He was done for.

Like Ramirez, the man in our gospel lesson lived outside of society. Not only was he considered a health hazard ... then as now, no one knew how someone caught leprosy. Lepers had to live on the fringes of town, cover their faces and cry “unclean, unclean!” when someone came near. They could not have families. They could not have a religious life. They were shut out, ostracized by fear and the strict rules of their culture that decreed who was in and who was out.

It was like death. Except they were still alive. And sick to boot.

And so when Jesus passed by, even though this poor leprous man knew that Jesus had the power to heal him, he didn't expect that he actually would. Why should Jesus care, when no one else did? Still, what other hope did he have? He could sense the power, the effervescent life pouring out of Jesus and he must have prayed that perhaps there was enough there for him.

"If you choose," he said hesitantly, "you can make me clean."

And what happened next did not happen to the man, it happened to Jesus. Our translation says Jesus was "moved with pity," a term that literally means to have your guts twisted with sorrow. And that is one way to read it. But other manuscripts say that Jesus became angry. "I do choose. Be made clean," he said. In anger.

What would make Jesus angry, not simply filled with pity? What would he be angry at? The boldness of the man? The rigidity of the religious system? At God, for allowing people to suffer so?

Jesus became angry, some ancient manuscripts say. And I have been wondering about that reading for a week. But something Jose Ramirez said gave me an insight into this kind of anger. Ramirez told about a time when he was allowed to go home to Laredo for a visit. And because so little is known about Hansen's Disease and how people catch it, he was very cautious for his family. So his first morning home, Ramirez went out to the kitchen with some tape, and he began marking all the dishes he intended to use, a plate, a cup, a glass, some silverware.

His mother was in the kitchen, cooking tortillas. And she saw what Jose was doing, marking the dishes, setting them apart. She turned and snatched the plate, the cup, the glass, out of his hands and smashed them one by one on the floor. "She was very angry," Ramirez said, and then he began to weep, right on the radio, this 60 year old man, as he remembered the story.

He wept because his mother got angry that he would think that she would treat him like an outcast. He wept because she refused to treat him any differently from any of the rest of her children, because it didn't matter that he was sick, because she was going to risk catching whatever he had because she loved him, and he was home.

The leper said to Jesus, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” And Jesus became angry. Did this man think he *wouldn’t* choose? Did this man think that somehow he deserved to be scorned and ignored and ostracized? Did this man think that Jesus – JESUS! – was just like anyone else to pass him by without a second thought?

So, moved with anger, or moved with pity, or both maybe -- moved with a kind of indignant compassion much like Jose Ramirez’s mother, Jesus touched him. TOUCHED him. In a world that believed impurity was catching, that contact with this man would suck impurity out of him into Jesus, Jesus touched him. And instead, it all went the other way, love, compassion, healing, yes, and righteous indignation, too. Out of Jesus, into the man. “I choose. Be clean.” And the man was healed.

And then still a little bit worked up, Jesus sternly sent the man away to do the things he needed to do in order to rejoin his community, to see the priests, perform the necessary sacrifices, to become a complete Jewish man once more.

But I wonder if Jesus didn’t stay mad for a good long while after the man went away. Wondering about that statement, “if you choose,” wondering why that man or anyone else would think that God desires illness, that God desires ostracism, that God doesn’t long to reach out and touch every one of us who think we aren’t good enough, or important enough, or prepared enough, to receive God’s love and care.

Because aren’t we all lepers in one way or another, really? Hanging out around the edges of our own lives because we have been hurt in the past and we can’t forget it, or because we fear the pain of the future and we can’t risk it. Don’t we use our illnesses and our problems as a way to pull away from one another, rather than as a way to open up to one another? Most of us live according to our own internal purity code, hiding our real selves, our real failings, our real illnesses, away from the very people who might choose to love us anyway.

We know, somewhere in our heads, that just what the hymn says is true, that “Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.” But it’s hard to believe it in our hearts. It’s easier to hang on to the baggage of days, weeks, decades even, than to lay it down and let Jesus deal with it.

I have a friend who was struggling with a personal problem and she kept calling me up and saying, “I gave this over to God. I did. Why is it still bothering me so much?” And finally I couldn’t take it. I got mad and said, “You gave it to God, but you keep taking it back from him, so what do you expect????”

And somewhere up in heaven, God is smashing plates and glassware because we just don’t see it. We don’t see that it is us -- we are setting ourselves apart; we are buying into our own leprosy. It’s not “if you choose, O Lord, you can make me clean.” It’s “If I choose, I will let you make me clean.” And too often we don’t choose. We don’t invite God to help, or cast our burdens upon him, or let go of the very issues and injuries that separate us from one another and from God.

Why? I don’t know. Perhaps because it’s hard. It’s hard to let stuff go. It’s hard to let God in. It’s hard to let other people in. It’s hard to take the time and care that this sort of healing demands. And some of the very real things that trouble us and isolate us have physical components ... things like depression, addiction, cancer, or chronic debilitating pain. They require the care of trained professionals, along with the love and healing grace of God.

But our spiritual leprosy is something God can heal, and will heal. There is, in fact, no grief, no division, no obsession, no alienation, no conflict, no insult, no injury, no sorrow – that Jesus cannot heal.

If we choose.

Because God not only longs to restore that relationship we have with him. God longs to restore us to one another. Brothers and sisters, undivided. No one cast out, no one unclean. No one an “other.” Everyone an “us.” No one out. Everyone in. No one lost. Everyone found.

There is a moment when we can catch a glimpse of what Jesus is doing in the gospel lesson, when we can see what Jesus might be able to do with us ... if we choose.

It is in that instant after the confession and absolution, when we leap to our feet, restored to God and to one another, healed, renewed and whole. And we turn to one another in that sacred movement we call “passing the peace.” And we greet one another with God’s peace, and in God’s peace, and at peace ... if only for the briefest moment.

It can be like that for us more and more, deeper and deeper, if we choose. Jesus *does* choose. He chooses us, to heal us and make us whole. So the question for us is ... do *we* choose?