

“Where Are the Lepers?”

Mark 1:40-45

In the Middle Ages when a person showed signs of having contracted the dreaded disease known as leprosy, that person was given last rights by the priest, then banished from the community. He or she was regarded as legally dead and whatever possessions the person owned could be distributed to others. On Sundays, lepers were permitted to come into the community to attend mass, but not, of course, in the church building with other worshipers. There was a slit in the back of the church, called a “squint,” through which they could peer into the church and see what was going on.

“Squint” is the title of a new book written by a man named Jose Ramirez, Jr., with the subtitle: “My Journey with Leprosy.” In 1968 when Mr. Ramirez was 20 years old, after years of being sick with fevers, sores, and numbness in his hands and forearms, his family took him to a Mexican healer who told him that he had “a disease of the Bible.” He was diagnosed with leprosy, and as lepers had been dealt with for centuries before, he was uprooted from his community in Laredo, Texas, from his family and from his high school sweetheart and ordered by state officials to seek treatment at the only leprosarium in the continental United States which was in Carville, Louisiana.¹

Leprosy, or Hansen’s disease as it is known now, is still around today, mostly in India, Brazil, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Nepal, but according to the World Health Organization, it is on the decline. What made leprosy such a terrible disease for so many centuries was not only the physical effects of the disease itself, but the social stigma attached to it, and being ostracized from the community. “Leprosy was considered a divine curse for sin in the Old Testament and a karma in Buddhism. The term leprosy originates from the Latin word *lepros*, meaning defilement. The fact that leprosy has been deemed an incurable disease, causing severe deformities and disabilities, has resulted in severe stigmatization. This has resulted in double suffering by victims, both from the disease itself and from public discrimination.”²

When Mr. Ramirez arrived at the leprosarium in Carville, Louisiana, he encountered people who had been disfigured by the disease, who were no longer able to walk, whose hands were stumps, whose noses had collapsed. He was very afraid, and he wondered if he would ever again be able to live a normal life, walk and hold hands with his sweetheart. Fortunately for him, he was spared the most debilitating effects of the disease because of a new medication that he was given. The only permanent physical results for him are some scars on his legs. But there are other scars, he says, scars on his soul. He knows first hand about the stigma associated with leprosy and he has worked, with others to address that stigma.

The leper who came to Jesus that day, whatever physical effects of the disease were manifest in his body, also knew about the stigma of leprosy. He knew about isolation and banishment, and he knew the laws that governed his existence. He was required to keep his distance from people, to warn those who might otherwise come close to him by calling out: “leper.” On this day, however, he chose to ignore those laws, to take a dramatic risk, and to approach Jesus. Mark says that he came to Jesus, kneeling before him and begging him to heal him. And there is something very tender about this exchange between the leper and Jesus. The leper says to Jesus: “If you choose, you can make me clean.” In other words, he seems to be saying that he was no doubt about Jesus’ ability to heal him, only about his willingness. Mark says that Jesus, moved with pity, stretched out his hand and touched him and said: “I do choose. Be made clean!”

When you look for modern day parallels that you and I can relate to, what often comes to mind is the disease of AIDS. The stigma attached to AIDS, especially in the early years, was very similar to leprosy. Health workers were afraid to touch AIDS patients, and no one wanted to be around them.

And, there was also an attitude prevalent that these people with AIDS were responsible, that they had committed sin and were receiving their just punishment. AIDS is a natural parallel to leprosy.

But this time around when I considered this story about the healing of the leper, another, different parallel came to mind. When I thought about people today who are ostracized and banished from society, forced to live in separate communities, who are looked upon as deserving of their fate, I thought about the people in our jails and prisons. Maybe it was partly because of a conversation I had with someone this week on this subject, and maybe it is partly dealing weekly with kids each week, some of whom have been incarcerated already in their young lives. And I thought again about the words the leper used when he approached Jesus: "If you choose, you can make me clean."

And it dawned on me, when I thought about that, that I have made a choice in regard to the prison and jail population. The choice I have made is to put them out of my mind. I choose not to think about them. It is mostly a subconscious choice, but there is also an element of consciousness about it. Why do I choose not to think about them? Because it disturbs me. It is disturbing to think about men and women living for years, and in some cases for nearly a lifetime, in cells no bigger, and probably a lot smaller, than the bedrooms that we sleep in. I don't like to think about people cut off from their families, from the world, from the ability to go to the mall or walk down the street.

In addition, I don't like to think about what it is that has gotten most of these people to the place where they are now. I don't like to think about the crimes they have committed or about the lives that in some cases they have destroyed. There is nothing about the situation that these people find themselves in that makes me want to have anything to do with them. Like lepers living in a leper colony, it is best that we not see them or have any contact with them. Put them behind tall walls and impenetrable gates and iron bars.

But if the thought of these people being in prison disturbs me, there are some other things that disturb me as well. I was deeply disturbed recently to hear the story of a man named Timothy Cole. Just this last Thursday, after twenty-four years, his mother and his other family members and friends, along with his accuser, went to a court in Austin, Texas and had Timothy's name cleared. In 1985 Timothy was a student at Texas Tech. Bright, likeable, studious, an African American student from Ft. Worth, he had never been in any trouble. But because he often waited for a friend who worked at a pizza parlor near where a sophomore coed had been raped, the police took a Polaroid picture of him and showed it to the victim who identified him as her assailant. There was no physical evidence. His friends testified they were with him on the night in question, but the prosecutor convinced the all-white jury that they were just covering for him. He was convicted and sent to prison.

It turned out that the man who actually did the crime was in the same prison and heard Timothy sobbing and crying out that he was innocent. Ten years later, after the statute of limitations had run out, this other man wrote a letter to the district court confessing to the crime, but he never got a response. He tried again, asking for a lawyer and again got no response. He wrote to the District Attorney who had prosecuted the case. Nothing. Finally, in 2007, assuming that Timothy was out on parole, he wrote a letter to him confessing to the crime. But it was too late. Timothy had died of untreated asthma while in prison.³

According to the Innocence Project, there have been 232 post-conviction DNA exonerations in the United States. Wrongful convictions reversed by DNA evidence, according to the Project, are only the tip of the iceberg, since so few cases involve DNA. New York, Illinois and Texas are the states with the most wrongful convictions overturned by DNA testing. It's disturbing to think of innocent people being put into prison for crimes they did not commit, and, as we know, a number of innocent people have been executed.

Of course, we also know that the vast majority of people in prison are not innocent. And yet, there are disturbing things to consider there also. It is disturbing to hear that the United States has more people incarcerated than any other country in the world. With something like 5% of the world's population, the United States has 25% of the world's prison population. What is it about our society that causes so many of our citizens to end up in prison? These are things I would rather not think about, and that on most days I choose not to think about.

But I can't help thinking that there are some people in our prisons and jails who, like the leper who came to Jesus, want to be made whole, and that, if given a chance, could do that. Now I know, some of you are thinking that I am naïve. The truth is, I probably am. Most of us who go into the ministry have the idealism gene built in. I'm not so naïve, though, that I don't know that there are some very bad people in our prisons and that we should be very grateful for that.

Still, we are Christian people, are we not? Don't we say that God loves everyone? Don't we preach that Jesus went after the lost sheep, leaving the 99 sheep who weren't lost to fend for themselves? Don't we quote Jesus who said that it is not those who are well who need a physician but those who are ill, and that it was not the righteous that he came to rescue, but sinners? Does that mean something or not? If we are Christian people then we claim to believe in redemption, in rehabilitation, in the possibility of a person changing. Maybe we need to change our thinking from "lock them up and throw away the key," to the concept of *restorative* justice, not just *retributive* justice.

This past week on Thursday when Nick and I visited the Cayuga Home for Children, about eight boys showed up. I wish I could tell you how likeable these boys are and what a privilege it is that we get to know them. They are bright and energetic. Some are sullen and you can tell that they have had a very hard life already. This week we were talking about trying to get rid of some of the things in our lives that cause us problems, and a boy I will call Chad asked if he could talk. Whenever he talks, I have trouble understanding him. He is a big guy, tough looking. He comes from a neighborhood where if you show fear, you are in trouble. He said he would just as soon fight with you as talk with you. His father left his mother at some point and went to live somewhere else. He had a girlfriend. Chad stayed with his mother for a while, but it sounded like he was getting to be too hard to handle for her, so he went to live with his father. But after a while his father kicked him out. Chad is angry, and he is hurting. It is not hard for me to imagine him getting into some really serious trouble at some point if he doesn't get his life together. Ten years from now he could be a hardened criminal, and what a tragedy that would be. Or, he could be a productive citizen. And again, I think of the leper kneeling before Jesus: "If you choose, you can make me clean."

I'm not asking for volunteers to go into the prison for visits. I am only asking that maybe we as a church make a conscious choice – that we choose not to ignore the people who have been ostracized and banished from us, that we choose to think about them, and maybe to think about ways that we might make a difference in their lives. Jesus said, "I do choose – be made clean."

¹ NPR, All Things Considered 2/1/09

² World Health Organization. 1991.

³ NPR, *Morning Edition* 2/5/09

* * * * *

Phil Windsor
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Auburn, New York
February 15, 2008