

## **Sermon 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Epiphany Year B February 12 2012**

All four of this week's passages speak to bodies which are hurting. Na'aman, the Syrian general has leprosy, which in the ancient world meant any type of skin ailment, anything from a rash to an infection, to a contagious disease. **Psalm 30** speaks of being healed from illness and promotes what could be interpreted as manipulative prayer used as a trick to heal the body. In **1 Corinthians 9**, Paul speaks of being in a race and torturing his body to win the imperial prize of an imperishable wreath. Jesus heals a sick man with leprosy and tells him to go to the priest and follow the temple traditions and rituals.

While Naaman keeps going to the ruling classes for answers it is the slaves in the lower classes who provide a solution for him, although he resists it. Again, God uses those who are unexpected to bring a message of hope and healing.

The leper in the gospel is desperate and breaks the law to seek healing from Jesus. If one was labeled a leper; one was considered unclean; not welcome in public places. Lepers were religious, social, political and economic outcasts. To be labeled a leper meant a life on the fringes, a life of poverty and suffering. This, of course, meant that association with even their closest family members, friends and neighbors was cut off. Most of us who have been on the receiving end of being ostracized know and experience how hurtful and painful that can be. The ostracized are often made to feel inferior and less than human. But this leper approaches Jesus out of his desperation,

kneels before him...Jesus takes pity on him and heals him. Both lepers in our readings today experience something deeper than the healing of their disease...they experience wholeness.

Lot's of people are healed from diseases thanks to the advances of medicine, but go back to the same dead-end lives they were living before they got sick. To be made whole is something else. It is to be changed, it is to be transformed, and it is to know that God is at work in your life, it is to be overcome by joy. To be healed can mean a lot of things; death is actually a form of healing. But to be made whole is to be enveloped by a peace that passes all understanding, it is to know a joy that bubbles up uncontrollably, it is to know the power of God's grace in one's life, and it is to respond with thanks, with gratitude, with laughter. Naaman and the leper in the gospel were made whole. Both were overjoyed. If the passage from 2 Kings continued a few more verses today we would hear the joy and gratitude on the part of Naaman.

The encounter between Jesus and the leper shows the profound joy and gratitude the leper felt...this unclean leper, in spite of Jesus' "stern warning" to button his lips and keep his healing a secret, goes out and becomes an evangelist, a witness, and messenger of the Good News! "He went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word." There is an enthusiasm, a vim and vigor here within this leper that his healing TRULY IS GOOD NEWS WORTH SHARING WITH EVERYONE HE MEETS. HE CANNOT HELP HIMSELF, HE CANNOT HOLD BACK, SO HE RESPONDS WITH JOY AT HIS NEW FOUND WHOLENESS BY SHARING THE MESSAGE OF JESUS AND HIS LOVE.

In a lot of ways these two lepers this morning sounds like our world. I mean, we live among lepers. Sometimes we're the leper and other times we treat others like lepers. And there's no question we're all in search of wholeness. If we're honest we can admit that there are so many different kinds of barriers that separate us, that make us (or somebody else) a leper — fear, mistrust, misunderstanding, anger, loneliness, the inability to communicate with each other, the inability to communicate even with those we love the most and are closest to. In so many ways, we move through life shrouded in desperation. Either we feel like a leper to the world, untouchable and unclean — or we have chosen others to be treated like lepers, untouchable and unclean.

After all it's easier to treat one another as lepers. It's easier to avoid any chance of coming together, because, heaven forbid it, we might be transformed by one another, we might be changed, we might even come away liking one another, we might sense the movement of God and experience joy — and we just can't have that, can we? We can't risk that possibility, can we?

We can't risk the chance that we might be wrong or that we might actually change our minds and find a new place of wholeness that wasn't apparent to us. And when that happens our wholeness turns to joy and laughter.

I was talking with someone who is going through some major life changes. They asked me how you know when the choices you make are choices God has in store for you. I said that in my own experience I have one fool-proof test. When I close my eyes and ask if God is leading me, if I see Jesus laughing at me, I know it's the right thing. I asked the person if they've ever had this image of Jesus laughing at them. They said YES they had. I said then you should pay attention, because chances are this is what God intends for you. Sometimes we take ourselves too seriously...all the while Jesus is laughing at us to say...**not so fast....not so serious...don't you know I already love you and want wholeness for you. All you have to do is look around you to see that I love you ....I offer you healing and wholeness, just pay attention to what is right in front of you. Don't be afraid to be wrong or change your mind. I want hearts that are open to being transformed and I will lead you there, even though you might not want to go or don't see it....go anyway...it's part of my healing and wholeness for your life.**

We live in a world in which we are lepers and turn others into lepers. Jesus offers sometime else...wholeness...healing that leads to transformation filled with joy, gratitude and yes laughter. Amen.