

## **OUTSIDERS**

**Scriptures:** 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

**Texts:** 2 Kings 5:1; Mark 1:40-41

The stories we heard this morning are about outsiders. From the book of 2 Kings we hear about Naaman, who was a mighty warrior but now suffers from leprosy. Naaman's disease puts him outside the normal circle of his society. For the Great Historian, Naaman is also an outsider because he is a foreigner serving Aram against Israel.

The person who is only identified as a leper in the gospel reading is also an outsider. Like Naaman, his disease puts him outside the normal circle of his society.

Finally, even Jesus is seen as an outsider even though that identification might not be apparent at first.

Being an outsider is probably not outside of our experience—at some point in our lives, we may have experienced separation from others, and as a consequence we end up feeling less certain about ourselves and how we fit into our world. I would imagine that for many us, such experiences happen in school, especially in those awkward middle school or early high school years.

Sometimes television shows such as Glee or Freaks and Geeks hit any uncomfortable chord because they may fall too close to home. For me, I went to a high school where athletics, especially football, were highly valued, and folks like me who had as much coordination as argyle socks with plaid pants and striped shirts were considered outsiders. Outsiders can be shunned or teased with impunity; and it is communicated that being an insider is highly valuable. People on the fringe of being insiders were often most vicious to the clear outsiders because it was seen as one of the ways in.

Life was measured by who was in and who was out. I think what was most disheartening about the system of in and out was that it was often measured by characteristics over which one had no control. Sometimes you were out simply because you were you. One wondered: is there a cure for terminal geekiness? And because one did not have control over what was considered in or out, that helplessness often resulted in a lot of depression, anger, or acting out. The system created winners and losers, and the losers often felt that they had no recourse.

We can then understand Naaman's edginess and anger revealed in the story from 2 Kings. Even worse for Naaman was that he had the consummate insider but because of his disease he had been forced to be an outsider in the society that had held him in high regard. No wonder he gets so angry in the story when Elisha fails to show him proper obeisance and did not make a show for his healing.

The anger in the gospel story is less apparent though.

The accepted story line for this gospel reading seems to fall into the area of compassion. Jesus' response to the leper is seen as pity or compassion for his illness. With the leper's cleansing, the action seems to point toward to compliance with the accepted social system and the delight of the cleansed man who cannot help but deliver good news to the people around him.

But several of the New Testament commentators I read suggested that the story may be mistranslated and so we miss the anger that permeates this story.

This story comes in a string of stories about healing and ritual cleansing; yet, the earlier healing stories point to a growing conflict between Jesus and the religious establishment. It seems out of character for the gospel writer not to continue the ongoing controversy of Jesus challenging the brokenness of the systems in his world. Why should this story seem such a simple case of compassionate healing and conformity with the religious and social norms?

Rather the tenor of the story changes when we realize that the man who is only identified as a leper—and that should be telling in itself—comes before him with a challenge, “If you dare, you are able to cleanse me.” If you dare? Why would someone challenge Jesus to cleanse him/her because we like to think that Jesus would heal without prompting?

The answer may come in Jesus' response. Most translators have chosen manuscripts that say that Jesus feels compassion or pity for the man; but other manuscripts clearly say that Jesus is moved by anger. Because anger is the more uncomfortable word and the one that does not necessary correspond to our image of Jesus, Biblical scholars will often choose the harsher translation as the more original reading. Anger might make more sense when we realize that Jesus has not only touched the man but also plainly states, “I do [dare], be clean!” Further the phrase “sternly warned” can be more accurately translated “snorting with indignation, Jesus cast the man out (not the meek sent him away). When Jesus tells the man to present himself to the priest (notice the singular—as though a specific person is in mind) and to offer what's needed according to the Law (from Moses), it is as a testimony against them (not to them).

So we may wonder, if these choices of translation are correct, what is going on?

As we may know, leprosy in the first century did not always refer to Hansen's disease. Rather the term, leprosy, was loosely applied to just about any skin disease that caused some disfiguration. Leprosy, then, was a social condition based loosely on some sort of skin condition where a person was outcast from his social setting. The label marked you as an extreme outsider; once labeled, you could not go into your house or village, you could have no contact with human beings—even your family, you could not earn a living, and you might lose everything—sold by your family to provide sustenance for you outside the village.

The problem, of course, is that the label was often applied unevenly. If you had any kind of skin condition, someone could report you to the priest and you would be declared unclean. As an outsider who has no rights, those on the inside might take advantage of you by selling the few possession you had owned for their profit. Further, if your condition cleared up or lessened, the priest still might not declare you clean if you could not come up with an

appropriate offering—or connection. Most people were unlike Naaman, who had the help of his king and the king's wealth to help him. Those who were poor could rarely find respite, not for their disease, but for their social standing.

Commentators, such as Ched Myers, suggest that Jesus' anger comes not at the leper for his challenge but from the knowledge that the dare is given because if Jesus does dare to cleanse the man, he will be acting against the religious system. This short story gives a sense that the man had already consulted the priest and had been turned down because he could not present the proper offering. Jesus is indignant with the system that protects the powerful and wealthy while taking advantage of the poor and powerless—Jesus' cleansing is a witness against the system.

In touching the man, Jesus subverts the system further by touching an unclean person, which in this system means that Jesus is now unclean. Of course, the irony is that the former leper is now welcomed back into his society while Jesus is forced to stay in the wilderness, unable to enter the city—as though Jesus is now the leper.

Yet Jesus' anger is not destructive—his anger leads to the cleansing of the former leper and the story the former leper tells to others continues to connect Jesus to the common people. Even though he cannot enter the cities because of his conflict with the religious establishment, people still come to him. His anger here is redemption and creates the possibility of transformation. I am reminded of an observation by Sister Joan Chittister, “Anger is not bad. Anger can be a very positive thing, the thing that moves us beyond the acceptance of evil.”

I do not believe that anger is the end of the story. I suspect that both manuscript translations of compassion and anger are valid—I think they represent the graceful approach that Jesus has toward human systems that corrupt and destroy human connections.

One commentator, Ross Emmett, observed that what happened in this story is that Jesus demonstrated the fullness of charity. We often think of charity as something we do for others, especially those who are struggling to make ends meet and provide for their families. We collect clothes or food items or furniture or cash to help provide for those who have needs. Often we'll go away feeling good about what we've done—we might get a little reward in a tax write off—but we may remain untouched.

Jesus demonstrates that the ultimate act of charity is incorporating the other into one's community. Jesus dares not only to cleanse the man but also to touch him thereby including himself in the leper's ostracism. Jesus restores not just the leper's health; he restores the man's humanity and tells that man that the broken system does not define him.

God works through us to build up community, not just a community of the acceptable, rather we build up the whole community of all God's children. Our call is not simply to provide for people's needs; our call is to be part of the community that welcomes all God's children even those we are told that should not be here.

If the church needs to become a community of outsiders in order to faithfully follow Christ then let us dare to so.