

Epiphany VI (February 12, 2012)

*“Immediately the leprosy left him,
and he was made clean.”*

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Once again we are confronted with a story of healing. In today’s story, a leper approaches Jesus, begging for merciful relief from his pain and torment. It is said that Jesus is moved with pity. Other accounts say that Jesus is moved with anger. If anger, one can imagine such indignation directed at the effects of evil that this man carries in his body and in his soul. The result of this man’s condition is not simply physical, you see—it is psychological and spiritual as well. This man, because of his disease, is excluded from living in community. He is an outcast of society; he is a reject. He is avoided like the plague. Did he contract this illness

through his own neglect or through forces outside of his control? Whatever the case, the God who sets up humanity to live in the bond of peace within the bounds of community observes with pity when such harmonious living is broken down. Loneliness, boredom, feelings of worthlessness, and hopelessness: these kinds of symptoms cut to the core of one’s being. And it is this reality of rejection which Jesus confronts and seeks to heal: Jesus touches the man, restoring him back to wholeness—not merely physical wholeness, but He restores the man’s proper place in society. And He wishes to do the same for us.

The heart of Jesus’ ministry does not lie with the superficial physical, but it gets to the very core of our being. The mortal body, Paul teaches us, is a vehicle

meant to be put in the service of obtaining an immortal victory, one which is not limited to this fading physical realm. The body, with all its thoughts, feelings, and actions, is to be put in the service of godly aspirations, and it is to be disciplined so as to win the race of life. Jesus sternly tells the newly-healed man in the Gospel story not to advertise the miracle: Jesus does not want to be seen as simply a Miracle Man—for He is much more than a healer of the physical world. He does not intend for His ministry to be limited to healing the mortal body which will eventually fade forever, but He intends to get at the soul, and focus on its healing for eternity. We are perhaps not surprised to learn that the newly-healed man cannot contain himself, the result being that Jesus could no longer enter the town to

proclaim the Good News of the eternal Kingdom of God, being hampered by so many petitions for healing.

We are called, as Christians, to live in the community of God's Kingdom, and to do so as best we can in the present moment so as to condition us for community forever. All of us here at St. John's are meant to live in genuine Christian community. But who are the modern-day lepers among us? What spiritual diseases do we bear within us, causing us to be separated from our community? Think on these symptoms: cynicism, bitterness, envy, self-centredness, judgemental attitudes, pride, pessimism, and stubbornness—to name but a few. How do these illnesses cause us to be separated from community? We are members of a real, ever-evolving community—one

which is bigger and better than any one of us individually. When we seek to shape community through our own limited visions, however, and then find our feeble wills thwarted, our danger is to view community as something from which we can disengage, or even walk away, seeking our vision elsewhere. Real communal living, however, is when we courageously and humbly submit ourselves to a life beyond ourselves.

So as to consider the dangers of pride and the risk it carries of excluding us from our call to unity and wholeness, let us take a look at this morning's First Lesson. Naaman, the great army commander, almost forfeited the possibility of his healing, as he allowed his pride to blind him. He was advised to seek the help of a prophet, yet he sought the help of a king instead—he

thought himself too important to seek a mere prophet. Then he became indignant when the prophet wouldn't give him the courtesy of a show of healing. And then the simple healing instructions seemed beneath the great commander. Finally he was persuaded to humble himself in order to be healed, and he was—but he was very close to forfeiting his wholeness because his sin of pride was such a powerful, blinding force.

Have we seen and known the effects of our sins, and being excluded from community because of them? Do we see and know the effects of our spiritual leprosy? Whether we have contracted our sins through our own devices, or by inheriting pieces and parts of sin from our environment—forming our present personalities—whatever the case, to some extent and to some degree

we are all ill and we are all in need of healing. Perhaps our sour negativity causes us to be excluded from a fuller fellowship in the church. Perhaps our fear of welcoming strangers in our midst and allowing space for their new ideas leads to our loneliness and despair. Whatever the case, if indeed we recognize our souls' sicknesses (which we must if we face ourselves with honest self-examination) we must seek the kind of spiritual healing that only the Great Physician can give. It's high time that we allow our personalities to be transformed by the refining fire of love so that we may be aglow with Love. And when those evil forces within us which repel genuine community are banished and driven away, and when Love takes their place and takes over, then we will be a Christian community like no

other. I think that the "True Lenten Disciples" as outlined in this morning's bulletin speaks volumes concerning the kind of Lent we are called to enter into.

With pity and anger at the real and damaging effects of sin and evil, Jesus is willing to heal us. Let us then come to him, laying down our burdens, and let us be transformed more and more into His likeness as we journey with Him to the Cross of death, so that we may joyfully pass through the gates of New Life.

Now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all honour, power, glory, might, majesty and dominion, both now and for evermore.