Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



"Christ Healing the Leper," from the series "The Story of Christ," a 1534-35 engraving by Georg Pencz (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



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"Unclean!"

Sometimes a message conveys the inverse of what was intended.

A man with a skin disease begged Jesus for help. Had he already done his ritual shout? Had he torn his clothing? Was he following the rules about beard and hair so that he looked "Unclean!"?

In Jesus' time, healing lepers was nearly the equivalent of raising the dead. In the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures only two people were healed of leprosy, Moses' sister Miriam (Numbers 12:10-15), and Naaman, the Syrian (2 Kings 5:1-14). Avoiding lepers had nothing to do with fear of contagion, an idea first introduced in the 11th century by Ibn Sina, a Muslim physician and philosopher. A 16th-century Italian, Girolamo Fracastoro, seems to have been the first to propose the germ theory — an idea that was largely rejected for hundreds of years. So why the taboos?

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 11, 2024

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46
Psalm 32
1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1
Mark 1:40-45

The purity system of Jesus' day attempted to keep the world as it ought to be, with holiness equated with wholeness. Contact with an unclean person or thing rendered a person temporarily unclean as well; the unclean were to be avoided. Because the ban on these people was a socioreligious regulation, it had deep roots in the people's psyche. The resultant shunning increased the discomfort of people already afraid or ashamed.

"Unclean!" That was the shout Jesus heard more than once. What did he see when someone had to declare that about herself or himself? Mark tells us that the man's

cry hit Jesus in the gut. He felt for the man, and he felt with the man. And so, in a gesture that defied the purity system itself, Jesus touched the man, demonstrating that no person deserves such shunning. Then, demonstrating the absurdity of such dehumanizing laws, Jesus told the man to complete the legal rituals so that the priests could learn that Jesus had the power to free people from systems that destroy innocent people.

In effect, Jesus took up the man's shout, "Unclean!" But instead of declaring himself unclean for touching the man, he unmasked the system itself as unclean — as something contrary to God's intention for the world. Of course, the legal eagles were not going to take that lightly. Jesus acted as a subversive, and he was attracting the attention of people who were victims of a system of stratification authorized by powerful people who benefited from it.

Jesus told the healed man not to publicize the matter. Fat chance! Mark doesn't tell us who else witnesses their encounter, but the very fact that the man could walk in public and eat with others was enough of a proclamation that something new was afoot. It was not going to remain a secret — not from the curious, not from disciples, and certainly not from those who recognized Jesus as a threat to their comfortably established way of doing things.

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Today, as last week, St. Paul's words to the Corinthians add another facet to understanding the implications of Jesus' behavior. Paul and the Corinthians had been embroiled in legalistic battles over food purity. In this situation, when large amounts of meat had been offered to the gods, the leftovers went to the market. The question: Could Christians eat that meat or was it a communion with idols? Paul insisted that Christians were free from the law, that obedience to the law would never save anyone. Thus, they could eat what they wanted. The real problem was that some people were scandalized by the eating habits of those who felt free.

Paul's solution is applicable far beyond the dinner table. He says, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." (Sounds a bit like Ignatius of Loyola.) That instruction brings us right back to Jesus, the transgressor whose rule of life was to promote human thriving.

Paul said, "You are so free, that you can care for one another above all else. If another is seriously offended by your exercise of freedom, make yourself free enough to practice charity!" That's the rule for the dinner table. Paul encourages the community to imitate Christ. Christ lived a new kind of freedom as he transgressed the law on behalf of human flourishing.

The implications of all of this seem almost too obvious to mention. Be imitators of Christ. Imitate the one who responded first to the marginalized, to society's outcasts, to the ones who feel they can never measure up. These neighbors of ours live next door, barred from schools and churches because of their sexual orientation, they're at our border hoping to save their lives, they are being injured by our armaments.

How are we to imitate Christ today?

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