

The Rev. Michael C. Fedewa

February 15, 2009

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

1 Kings 5:1-14

Psalm 30

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Mark 1:40-45

In his memoir entitled, *Squint*, Jose Ramirez recounts his life with the disease, leprosy, or as he prefers, Hansen's disease. Ramirez, who was diagnosed with Hansen's disease in 1968, at the age of 20, chose the title "Squint" for two reasons. The first is that he recalls, that after he was diagnosed with the disease, he was immediately transported to the last leprosarium in the United States, in Carvel Louisiana. Since, ambulances were for persons who were "living", Ramirez, considered to be among the living dead, was transported to Carvel in a hearse. He recalls stopping at gas stations, en route, and watching people as they would squint their eyes to peer into the hearse. He also said, that squint was an architectural feature that was used back in the Middle Ages to signify an opening in the back of a church. And it was specifically set up for persons who were considered to have leprosy. Whenever anybody was deemed to have leprosy, they were given the last rites, banished from the community and then forced to come back on Sundays for service. But they could only participate through looking at - through this architectural feature called squint.

Ramirez spoke of the loving support he received in those days from his mother. He remembered the first weekend he was allowed to go home to be with his family. To try to help alleviate any fear that his family members might have had of catching the disease from him, Ramirez recalls that he was marking his silverware, his glasses, and his plates so no one else would use them. When his mother saw him doing this, she burst into tears, and smashed the plates and glasses that he had marked. He was part of her family she said, and she would not allow him to separate himself in any way from others in his family. Her love for him, her embrace of him as part of her family allowed him to overcome the fear and isolation so often associated with the disease.

The disease of leprosy is certainly central in our readings this weekend. In our reading from Kings, we hear the much loved story of Naaman, the Syrian who was healed by the God of Israel through the waters of the Jordan. There is so much human drama in this story that makes this story so marvelous. There is the fact that The Lord was at work beyond the borders of the people of Israel and heals a pagan. There is the young nameless girl who first speaks of the power of the prophet of The Lord in Israel. There is the anger of the King of Israel, the intervention of Elisha, stubbornness and pride of Naaman, which nearly prevents him from being cured. And there is of course, the cleansing and cure itself. God works through creation, through the waters of the Jordan to bring healing. Even today, it is important to honor the healing powers of creation.

Barely noticeable in the story is the fact that Elisha does not come out to see Naaman. No, instead he sends his messenger with the instructions. Why? Perhaps it is because Elisha is afraid. He does not want to risk that he himself might be afflicted with the disease. Perhaps it is because Elisha does not want to be made unclean. Elisha heals Naaman from a distance. Naaman is cleansed of his leprosy, but the isolation of those afflicted with leprosy remains.

Contrast this with the Gospel. The leper comes and begs Jesus to make him clean. Lepers were isolated not only because of their disease. They were isolated also, because it was believed that the leprosy was a result of their own sin. They were spurned because it was believed that spiritual impurity was the root of their physical impurity. In response to the man's cry, Jesus does not send a messenger. He does not keep his distance. Instead, Jesus reaches out and touches the leper. The compassionate touch of Jesus

overcomes fear and embraces the man afflicted with leprosy. The compassion of Jesus cured the man physically and spiritually. Jesus reached out and touched the man with leprosy, and overcame the physical and spiritual isolation that afflicted him.

We may not be able to heal the sick by the touch of our hands. As faithful followers of Jesus, we do however have the power to heal persons of their isolation. In our society there are many who are considered by some to be impure, unfit physically or spiritually. In our society there are many persons that we are afraid of. We may be afraid of some with certain addictions, certain physical or mental illnesses. We may be afraid of those who are guilty of certain crimes or sins. We may be afraid of those who have been in prison. We may be afraid of those who act differently than we, who believe differently than we, who look differently than we do. We may be afraid of those who are in any way broken, any way less than whole. In our day people who have lost jobs, often feel cut off from former colleagues. Those who experience divorce feel isolated and alone. Isolation makes difficult times worse. At the root of this isolation is often fear. Our fears too often build walls of division. Our fears too often isolate others. The leper said to Jesus, if you choose, you can make me clean. If we choose, we can overcome our fears and bring healing to others.

Indeed dear friends, is it not true that each one of us knows some of the isolation felt by the man with leprosy in the Gospel. We know what it is like to be cut off and separated from others. Each of us know what its like to be broken. Each one of us knows those areas of our life that are less than whole, less than pure. Each one of has those areas of our life that cry out for pity. Each one of us knows what its like to cry out to Jesus, to beg Jesus: "If you want, you can make me clean". Jesus offers us all the embrace of God's compassionate love. Jesus offers us all the embrace of God's healing touch.

We gather, celebrate and give thanks that all are washed in God's compassionate, and merciful love. We gather, celebrate and give thanks that Jesus has torn down the walls of the squints and invited all God's children to come together. We celebrate and give thanks that Jesus has smashed the plates and the glasses of our isolations, and invited us all to eat of the one loaf and drink from the one cup. All of us are invited to share in the meal of his body and blood. Our celebration and thanksgiving are complete as the compassionate spirit of Jesus sends us into the world. We go into the world to embrace the suffering, to welcome the lonely, to tear down all walls that separate, to smash all that divides. We go into to the world proclaiming that by God's loving touch all can be made clean. We go into to world proclaiming that by God's loving embrace, all are made one.