

The Whole Thing Has Been Jerrymandered
Matthew 8:1-4; 16-17
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*“The ex-lepers know that the world is open to divine compassion.
God is not finished with the healing work.
And, dear sisters and brothers, neither are we.
Walter Brueggemann*

“Unclean! Unclean! I yelled at my sister threatening her with leprosy if she came near me or touched my toys. Where did I get this you wonder? Ben-Hur of course. I was 7 years old when my father took us into the city to see this bigger than life film on the big screen at Loew’s theater in Manhattan. I remember screaming when I saw the lepers then crying when Judah was told he couldn’t see his mother or sister. This was all I knew about this dreaded skin disease until I read about it in the Bible. Lepers appear in the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Jesus subverts the purity code in each of the cases whether it be one leper or 10.

So here we are today, the first healing story in the gospel of Matthew is a miracle story about healing a man with leprosy. Jesus has just come down from the mountain where he delivered his teaching on what discipleship should look like in what we now call the Beatitudes or the Sermon on the Mount. He has just told his followers that they must pay attention to those on the margins, the least of these.

Putting his words to the test, a leper steps forward and kneels before him saying, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” And then Jesus stretches out his hand and answers him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” And just like that the leprosy is gone. He is told not to tell anyone and to go to the temple and offer a sacrifice or gift and let the priest pronounce him clean so he can be welcomed back into society. In the Message translation, it reads: “Just quietly present your healed body to God. Your cleansed and grateful life, not your words, will bear witness to what I have done.”

In biblical times, leprosy was thought to be a skin disease that was contagious and brought on by a person who has committed a sin. Leprosy was divine punishment. Having leprosy, according to the law of Moses and outlined in Leviticus 13, demanded social isolation or exile from a person’s personal, social, and religious identity. The person was made to wear torn clothes and cover his or her upper lip and cry out. “Unclean! Unclean!” The person must live outside the camp or city. The leper was seen as both contagious and an outcast.

Though Jesus insists that he has not come to abolish the law but fulfill it by being deeply committed to the practice of righteousness, he did break a few laws that day. First, he welcomed the Leper, then he reached out his hand and touched him making himself now ‘unclean.’

I want to call your attention to a few details in this version of the healing. The first is Jesus’ response to the leper’s request; “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean. Yes, I do choose.” This is such a tender

moment. The leper recognizes Jesus' authority and gives him the freedom to choose to heal. I love this detail, "Yes, I do choose." Jesus, the divine healer, chooses to make us whole. There are no conditions for healing except to be sick. This is grace, the healing hand of God that is the source of life, the mercy that no one deserves but everyone gets.

Note also that Jesus insists that the leper must go to the temple and get his healing approved by the priest so he can be reinstated into society and that he shouldn't tell others? Why? Was he still trying follow the laws that say the Temple and its scribes have authority? Was Jesus trying to placate the religious authorities by following some of the rules?? Was he trying to keep under the radar who he was?

Finally, we also don't know how the leper responded? Did he follow the instructions and go all the way to Jerusalem or was he so transformed that he chose to shake off the guilt and shame that had been imposed and then went and formed a new society that welcomed all people, other outcasts?

By the way something like this happened in the United States at our own federally funded leprosy colony in Carville, Louisiana. This leprosarium was created in the 1894 on an abandoned sugar plantation. Patients with Hansen's disease which is a bacterial infection, were sent there to live separately from the rest of society. Blacks, Whites, Asians, and Latinos were sent there and lived together in the Jim Crow south. This was probably the most racially integrated community in the United States. In 1946 they formed a successful campaign so they could exercise their right to vote. Isn't it interesting that in the midst of our ongoing racism pandemic, a group of lepers found a way to live together in harmony sharing not just a common affliction but their common humanity?

When I had Covid, almost a year ago, I had to quarantine for 14 days. Every day around 10:30 in the morning, two members of the health department, came by to check my temperature and to make sure I was ok. I stood outside the door with all their protective gear on. I felt like one of the untouchables, a leper. Inside my Lenten chamber I made art installations with the purple gloves and toilet paper rolls. When I was pronounced free of infection and reentered society, I found that I had yet another identity. I was the leper and everyone's best friend depending upon the person. People felt safe with me because I had already had. Some even said they coveted my antibodies. Others felt a little worried to be around me hence the feeling of social isolation. Everyone asked where I got it. I found it telling that everyone assumed it was from somewhere else. The assumption was I must have done something to get it. I took a wee bit of pleasure in making sure people knew I was a minster who got Covid thus challenging their assumptions that even 'good' people could get it.

The disease gave me a taste of what it means to be an outcast but also how easy it is to 'other' people. Covid, however, is much more contagious than leprosy ever was, and shows how health and income inequalities determine the color of one's horizon or mortality.

Covid has also forced us all to live Lenten lives this year. Almost a year ago we started wearing masks, separating from family and friends, working from home, moving to virtual worship services. Whether quarantined or sheltering in place, we all know the mental and spiritual effects of being socially isolated. And now with the vaccine finally here, we will enter another round of who has it and who hasn't, who has been vaccinated and who has not. Who is in and who is not.

Dear Ones, I want you to remember that God does not draw lines between people. God has no outcasts. Here is the good news. God has no favorites which also means there are no requirements for health and happiness. The kingdom of God means no one is left alone outside the camp. No one is banished or declared untouchable. In her sermon, God's No Leper Left Behind Program, Lutheran pastor Nadia Boltz Weber says, "There is no outside the camp because since the moment of the incarnation, God has jerrymandered the whole thing. God entered our profane places of uncleanness and shame, pride and sickness and reached out to touch it all..."

Dear Ones, we are all loved and deserving of healing because Jesus chooses us. Love knows no borders. God's healing touch reaches out to all. We who call ourselves followers of Jesus are commissioned to do the same—to love in excess and to cross all boundaries. The whole thing has been jerrymandered from the beginning. Let the church say Amen.