

Skin Deep - B6Ord

Deacon Ray's Homily for February 14/15, 2009

At first 15 year old BB Blanchard, thought that the red mark on her leg was just a scar from a caterpillar bite.

But then it turned into a blotchy red rash that spread from her left calf to her foot.

After a biopsy her mother, Anne, sat her down and told her she might have Hansen's disease. "What's that?" BB asked. "You know," said Anne. "Leprosy."

Immediately BB remembered watching cartoons in religion class with Jesus and a leper in the corner all huddled up with his limbs falling off.

Her family, friends and teachers were also stunned to know this disease is still alive, only now referred to as Hansen's Disease.

Currently some 6,500 cases have been reported in the U.S., and around half a million new cases are diagnosed each year worldwide.

Thankfully for BB, much more is now known about the disease than in the time that the Book of Leviticus was written on in the time of Jesus'.

For instance, we know now that **Leprosy is not contagious, nor does it inevitably lead to a loss of fingers or limbs.**

It results from a treatable bacterial infection and, if caught early enough antibiotics can wipe it out before it causes disfigurement.

BB began treatment and was cleared to return to class, but she still had to deal with being a teenage leper, literally.

"A few girls, if I touched them accidentally, would say, 'Oh my God, your leprosy!'"

Yet her real friends did more than support her:

They lovingly mocked her. "We'd always call her leper, like, 'Hey, leper!'" says one friend.

At home her parents — also tried to keep things light. "I told her that when she starts dating, I'm going to tell the boys, 'If you kiss her, you'll get leprosy,'" says her dad, "'so you better keep your hands off her.'"

Today, after six months of treatment, BB is cured, but says, that her biggest fear is that she'll get it again.

On a recent Friday night, her friends introduced her to a boy and nudged her to tell her story. "I had leprosy, I'm cured, it's fine," she told the boy casually.

He stared back blankly, but BB was unfazed.

"When people hear leprosy, they think the worst," she says. "I want to educate the world. It's curable; you can live through this. It's not that bad."

Obviously, we've come a long way in our understanding of sickness and disease since the time that the Book of Leviticus was written for the Israelite people.

In large part, the laws of Leviticus were based on the ancient belief that sickness and sin were intertwined.

If someone got sick while eating a clam

no-one should eat shellfish - because the sickness must have been caused by God's condemnation of those who eat shellfish. Therefore - eating shellfish is sinful.

If someone got sick after eating pork -

Jews should not eat pork - for pork is unclean and provokes God's condemnation. Therefore - Eating pork is sinful.

If someone contracted a skin disease such as leprosy - sin must be involved.

Lepers are out of God's favor and thus - Unclean!

Only when they regain God's favor, and they can prove to the priests that their skin has cleared - can they rejoin the community.

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus moved with pity at the sight of a leper who begs him to be made clean.

Breaking the ancient Hebrew rules set forth in Leviticus, Jesus reaches out and touches the man to cure him from the dis-ease that has separated him from his family and community.

But Jesus knew that the physical cure that he offered to the Leper was only skin deep. And the message he had been sent to deliver was aimed at people's hearts.

If word spread that he was a miracle-worker . . .

people would seek only miracles -
the easy and immediate fix for their dis-ease.

**But Jesus had come to give them so much more.
Their physical illnesses were only skin deep.
He had been sent by his Father - to change their hearts.**

What Jesus' fear became reality -
He instructed the Leper that he had made clean
to tell no one but the priest - so he could get his certificate of health and return to the
community -
Instead, the guy blabbed it all over town.

Soon, Jesus was besieged by people

- hundreds and the thousands,
- each looking for the easy fix
- his touch--while their hearts remained unchanged.
- They wanted to be healed like that leper,
only on the surface.

Perhaps some of us here today
have been among those people that have
begged Jesus to cure our dis-ease
but not touch our hearts.

Perhaps we have begged Jesus to fix our problems -
while we held fast to the underlying cause of our problems.

- Restore my health Lord - but I'm not quitting smoking.
- Heal my marriage Lord - fix her or him. I'm just fine.
- Fix my kids Lord -
Undo the curse of my mother.
Make them not - just like me.

Or maybe the underlying cause of your dis-ease is that

- We've believed that fixing other people's problems
is totally in our own hands -
- and we are exhausted from carrying that weight.

It's tough being the Savior of the world - even small world's . . . like our children's world, or
our spouses world, or our parent's world.

I don't know if you've ever felt overwhelmed by trying to carry other people's problems. I know I have.

That's why like Jesus - sometimes we need to escape -

- To retreat into prayer
- to recharge our batteries.
- To refocus ourselves on what our mission really is.

Then, like Jesus, we'll be able to return

- stronger, more focused, and ultimately,
- more prepared to do the work that we've been created to do.

So, those are two of the messages that we might take from today's Gospel.

1. We can't always expect Jesus to change our lives and make us clean . . .
 - Especially if we haven't first cleaned out our hearts.
 - Especially if we haven't turned away from sin and been faithful to the gospel.

2. Even Messiahs need to get away sometimes.
 - So perhaps we too need to retreat
 - to get away from the noise, and busy-ness and clutter of life - even when -
- perhaps especially when -
our life is centered on the care of others.
 - We need to care for ourselves - our own spirit
 - We need to take stock of where we are
and what we are really about.

Over the next few months there will be several opportunities available for us to do just that . . .

- To spend time with the Lord -
- recharging our spiritual batteries
- and refocusing on what our personal life-mission is really all about.

There are Men's and Women's Retreats scheduled at Notre Dame Retreat House.

And Lent - which is only a week and a half away -

is always a good time to get our Spirit in order.

So whether today we find ourselves -

- **Unclean like the Leper** - in need of fixing and reconciliation
- **Or exhausted and overwhelmed like Jesus**, and in need of a rejuvenated body and recharged Spirit

today's scriptures have something for each of us.

And that something is a message from a God

- who loves us and
- wants us to be well and happy.

Just as leprosy is now curable, so too are dis-eases of the heart and Spirit.

And now is the time to seek a cure.

“Turn to the Lord in time of trouble
and be filled with the joy of salvation.”