

VI Epiphany (b)
 2 Kings 5.1-14; Mk 1.40-45
 February 15, 2009
 Church of the Holy Communion
 Fr. M. Dow Sanderson

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One of the great consequences of sin is that it has a distorting effect, even on those traits which most reflect the image of God in which we were created. Human beings were created with an enormous capacity to love. We all know how to *ooh* and *ah* at a baby. And countless couples celebrated romantic love in yesterday's Valentine's Day festivities. But the capacity to love can also grow most bitter and cruel and ugly. Misspent passion... in other words...a *distorted* love can wound very deeply. Even when people disappoint us in little ways, we find subtle... and not so subtle ways... of expressing our disapproval.

And for the bigger disappointments? Well...

Just last week, I read an interesting review of the poetry of T.S. Eliot... a new book has just been published on his famous work *The Four Quartets*... and in this review was an amazing quote. It seems that Eliot was quite a different person after his conversion to Christianity... and some of his old friends were none too pleased with the change. The quote is from his old chum Virginia Woolf, who wrote:

He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church... A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God. We must consider him dead to us from this point on,

To be treated as dead before one's death is an amazing thing. But we know that the human heart has just such a malicious capacity.

And in today's scripture, we hear that those with leprosy were among those who were so shunned.

For those who lived in Biblical times, both Old and New Testaments, leprosy was seen as a clear and certain sign of sin, and of God's punishment.

The banishment was so severe that the historian *Josephus* speaks of lepers as *those who were in no way differing from a corpse*.

What a miserable existence it must have been. And of course, it is the contrast between the miserable state and the power of God that constitutes our "epiphanies" on this sixth Sunday of the season.

First, there was Namaan, the Syrian... the foreigner... but a beloved military hero among his own people. And his illness, as you can imagine, was the occasion of much distress, even fatalistic resignation. For what could be done in such tragic circumstances?

But amazingly, there was a little slave girl in his household. A poor creature, carried away against her will, snatched from her mother, from her religion, from all she knew, and consigned for the rest of her life to wait on others. But rather than wallowing in pity, she kept her faith, and she told Namaan's wife of a holy man of Israel.

Namaan is quickly dispatched by the King of Syria to the King of Israel... he who was anointed by God himself to be the guardian of the chosen people. But like some in the church today who are likewise anointed and called, the

King of Israel had absolutely no concept of his own sacramental *identity*: *Am I God? Why do you come to ridicule me! This is nothing more than a test by the Syrians to provoke me!*

That, of course, is why the church has, from time to time, seemed impotent and powerless in the face of difficult situations. We forget our identity. We are ignorant of our calling, and like the King of Israel, we live fearfully rather than in the confidence of the power of God.

But Elisha, the prophet, heard of his King's pathetic response... and immediately sent word that Namman was to be sent to him.

Now notice carefully what the scriptures tell us next:

First, Elisha did not come out and personally greet Namaan. Is it possible that the stigma of Leprosy was such that even he wished to limit his contact with such a terrible illness? I wonder.

Secondly, there is great significance in the command that Elisha gives: *Go and wash seven times in the River Jordan.*

The Jordan *was* Israel. It was the river that God's people crossed as they entered the Promised Land... and of course, it is later where John baptized, and where Jesus himself was baptized and anointed by the Holy Spirit. The Jordan WAS Israel...

So what Elisha was really saying is: *Namaan, go and wash yourself in the culture of God's people. Leave your old life behind, and you shall emerge as a new creation. And wash yourself SEVEN times because God's creation was completed in a Sabbath, and he rested, contented in the creative goodness that his Word had accomplished.*

But that is not at all what Namaan wanted to hear. And it is not what most people want to hear.

Coming into God's culture means leaving behind what we claim as our own. Faith has its own language and vocabulary, its own culture and traditions. It seems alien and exotic to those who are much more comfortable with their own rivers, their own language, their own ways of doing things.

It has ever been thus. Being called into God's culture means necessarily that we are called into a new way of living, and we must die to our old selves, and be born again.

Happily, Namman's advisors had more sense than did he... And because he had absolutely nothing else to lose, and probably for no other reason than that, he reluctantly did as Elisha had commanded.

Six times he washed... and on the seventh... he was made clean...
Scripture tells us that his skin was like that of a little child...

Clearly, a typology of baptism, where by water and the Holy Spirit, we are a new creation. And with the innocence of a little child, we are made ready to enter the Kingdom of God.

In the Gospel story of the Leper and his encounter with Jesus, we see several similarities, but also important differences.

First, it is clear that the stigma has not changed. The Leper says to Jesus, *If you WILL, you can heal me.* Essentially what this means is: *If I, as a walking corpse are worth it to you, you could do this for me...but I'm not at all sure my humanity, or what's left of it, is worth the effort.*

Jesus, moved with great compassion, claimed that it was indeed worth it. That this man's humanity, depraved as it was, constituted the very reason that he, Jesus, had been born... to redeem the brokenness and sin of the human condition... and to redeem us by taking our sin upon himself. And then, so as graphically to make this point, he touched the man.

I cannot state clearly enough what a profound and radical thing this was. Nobody, for any reason, at any time, EVER, EVER touched lepers.

But Jesus did, symbolically changing places with this outcast....

And notice what Mark tells us... the Leper, now healed, having been certified by the priests in accordance with the law, is now free to come and go as he pleases! He is indeed a new man!

But Jesus, as his fame increases, and as the crowds press more and more upon him, becomes an outcast. He no longer can travel freely, and is consigned to the countryside and to the lonely places.

Such is the gift of grace from the savior we follow. He calls us from our own culture into his. But that is only after he has entered fully into our human condition. Living our life, facing its dangers, overcoming its temptations, curing its diseases, dying its death, lying down in our grave, in order that the power of all things which can separate from God and his people are banished forever.

None of us is a leper, thanks be to God... but each of us has been given a new life... for spiritually, without Christ's gift, we too are but corpses walking.

But Jesus has broken through the stigma. His touch has healed us, when nothing else would. And by his touch and His love our distorted and broken hearts are renewed and reoriented. We are set free to love him... and to love others in remarkably new ways.

Oh, and by the way... on behalf of T.S. Eliot, and all those other maligned souls.... *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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Amen