

Epiphany 6 – February 15, 2009  
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ  
Mark 1:40-45

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Today's reading presents us with yet another of Jesus' healing miracles. This time, Jesus is approached by a man with leprosy.

Before we can enter into what this text is saying, and how it speaks to us today, we need to take a few minutes to understand this man's illness and the ramification of his illness.

First of all, we now understand that those who were said to be lepers in the New Testament might have suffered from any of a whole host of skin diseases, not just leprosy or what we now call Hansen's Disease. It might have been eczema, ringworm, or something as simple as Athlete's Foot. But whatever the skin ailment was, it caused the person who suffered from it to be labeled as “unclean.”

According to Jewish law, anything that was unclean was to be avoided. It was believed that someone could become ritually unclean merely by contact with the unclean thing or person.

So this man who approaches Jesus is more than sick. He's become ritually unclean. And as such, he's become an outcast from society. The Old Testament is very clear in how these people are to be treated. Leviticus 13 says:

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.<sup>1</sup>

And because this man is not just sick, but also unclean, notice that he doesn't simply ask Jesus for healing; he asks for Jesus to make him “clean.” In effect, he's asking Jesus to make it possible not only for him to be made physically well; he's asking for Jesus to restore him to his community.

Remember how, for the past couple of weeks, I've been saying that Jesus' healing miracles rarely, if ever, produce faith? In this instance we have a man who comes to Jesus already possessing faith. He has the faith that Jesus can make him clean, if Jesus wills it.

In a radical break with Jewish law, Jesus stretches out his hand to the man and declares that he chooses to make the man clean. Simply by touching the man Jesus would have become ritually unclean, according to Jewish law, but this does not prevent him from touching the man and making him clean. Then Jesus commands the man to go show himself to the priests to complete the rituals required to restore him to community.

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Now it may be at this point where we are tempted to think to ourselves, “Thank goodness we don't have such barbaric notions anymore that isolate people from society, possibly for something as minor as Athlete's Foot!” And yet, we do still have very clear notions of what is clean and unclean, and that unclean things need to be isolated for the well-being of all of society.

Obviously, this notion remains alive and well in how we view certain diseases. For instance, I'm reminded of a woman I visited while I served as a chaplain at the National Institutes of Health nearly seven years ago. This lady was in an isolation room because she was preparing to undergo a stem cell transplant to treat her cancer. In order to do this, her immune system had to be completely destroyed in order to transplant the new stem cells; then the doctors would attempt to rebuild her immune system. This by itself justifies her isolation – her isolation was for her own protection, to keep her from catching even the most minor bug which could be lethal to a person with a compromised immune system.

However, this lady was forced to suffer an additional level of isolation. She also suffered from Hepatitis. Because of this, anyone who entered her room had to wear a mask, gown and gloves, in addition to the stringent hand-washing that would normally be required.

This lady had already been at the NIH for a couple of months when I first met her. I hadn't really thought much of these extra levels of isolation until one day, when she and I were speaking, when I reached out with my gloved hand to hold her hand. She immediately jumped, and looked at me with the most shocked expression. Then she began to cry. My first thought was, "What have I done wrong?!" I asked her what was the matter. She said that no one had touched her in all the time she'd be there. She said that, sure, the nurses came in and did what they had to do, but they always treated her as if she were unclean, as if they would catch something from touching her. She asked me why I wasn't afraid, too. I told her that I had my gown, mask and gloves on, and that I was quite sure I wouldn't catch anything. We sat there for quite a while, holding hands while she cried. Here was this poor soul, who had come to the NIH for healing, when what she needed most at that moment was to be restored to community with someone, anyone, through a simple touch.

Maybe sometimes we forget how much healing we can bring to those who are suffering through a simple touch, or a hug?

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I'm sure you've all heard by now about the horrible plane crash in Buffalo Thursday night. To close out today's sermon I'd like to read to you a press release I received from the ELCA yesterday. I think this story well illustrates the sort of healing that we, as the inheritors of Jesus mission, might hope to bring to those in need. Several months ago the ELCA adopted a new tagline: "God's work. Our hands." I think this story of people responding in Christian compassion well exemplifies this ideal. Here's the story:

The Rev. Stephen C. Biegner heard the Feb. 12 crash that claimed 50 lives when a commuter airplane plunged into a nearby home in suburban Buffalo, N.Y.

"I got over there as fast as possible and started praying," said Biegner, a pastor at Zion Lutheran Church, Clarence Center, only a few doors down from the fiery site.

Many of the firefighters and other rescue workers also rushing to the scene attend Zion, a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

"I saw a lot first responders being the hands of God," Biegner said. "They put themselves in harm's way. They focused on how to help and how to get people out."

The plane slammed into the home nose first and exploded into a fireball, killing everyone on board. Despite the intense heat, firefighters contained the blaze to the one property.

Meanwhile, the Rev. Randy P. Milleville, Zion's lead pastor, comforted the two survivors who had been inside the home at 10:15 p.m., when the plane burst through the roof. Douglas C. Wielinski, a 61-year-old engineer, died in his home.

His wife Karen, 57, and daughter Jill, 22, escaped the house after the crash. Mother and daughter were treated for minor injuries at a nearby hospital and released.

“The people who live there have no church home and Zion is reaching out to them,” the Rev. Marie C. Jerge, bishop, Upstate New York Synod, said in a statement.

For the next 24 hours, Biegner and Milleville slept little. They hustled from the crash site to the fire hall providing support, and to Zion to coordinate care.

The morning after the tragedy, Lutherans and others in the community bought food to the fire hall for the rescue workers. A mother and daughter delivered heart-shaped cookies in a show of support and gratitude.

“I've never seen so much food show up at a site in my life,” Biegner said.

“There were a lot of hugs and tears. I saw God's presence in the midst of a horrific tragedy.”

The Rev. Eric Olaf Olsen, pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Buffalo, soon joined the pastoral outreach at the fire hall. He said the firefighters were somber and quiet as they returned from the disaster scene.

“It takes a considerable toll in the firefighters,” Olsen said. “No amount of training really prepares you to see the things they saw.”

Olsen headed to the wreckage site around noon. As he prayed, he breathed in the pungent burning smell from the home, where smoke still billowed.

“I wanted to be there when they removed the human remains to say a blessing,” Olsen said. “I know God was with those people on the plane and able to shepherd them to a place of peace and mercy. I pray for their families. This is a crushing time and will be for many days ahead.”

This was not Olsen's first time responding to a deadly disaster. During the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he served as chaplain to Staten Island's Rescue 5, which lost 11 firefighters.

Continental Connection Flight 3407 took off from Newark en route to Buffalo about an hour before the Feb. 12 tragedy.

Investigators working to pinpoint a cause said that the pilots noted “significant ice buildup” moments before the plane hurtled from the sky.

Families and friends waiting for the plane to land six miles away at the Buffalo airport were taken to a senior citizens center in the nearby suburb of Cheektowaga. A few miles away in Williamsville, Kathy Johnston headed home to wait for her husband, unaware that his plane had crashed, according to one of her pastors.

Johnston had spent the evening consoling the family of an elderly woman from her congregation who died. Her death was not related to the plane crash. After Johnston left, the family heard about the plane crash and suspected it was her husband's flight. They called her, broke the news and then went to her home to offer solace, the pastor said.

Kevin Johnston was returning from a business trip when he died, according to news reports. He attended worship with his wife and three daughters, members of St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church, Williamsville, led by the Rev. Wendy Buckley and the Rev. Timothy G. Madsen, co-pastors.

Early Valentine's Day, the community packed the church for a prayer service in remembrance of Johnston and the other victims. Madsen delivered a heartfelt message to the mourners.

He said, “When we put our arms around each other and hold each other, we find God.”<sup>2</sup>

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“God’s mission. Our hands.” May it be so. Amen.

<1,782 words>

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 13:45-46

<sup>2</sup> ELCA News Service, February 14, 2009: Lutheran Pastors, Rescue Workers Respond to Buffalo Plane Crash. <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Communication-Services/News/Releases.aspx?a=4059>, downloaded 2/14/09.