

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
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28th Sunday of Year C Luke 17:11-19

Serious illness can strike anyone at anytime. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, the wife of the famous aviator, wrote about illness, that one of its most insidious aspects is the sense of isolation that often accompanies it. A person suffering from some serious illness often feels very much alone, that no one else really understands what he or she is going through. Susan Sonntag wrote in Illness as Metaphor that sickness can be more than a physical reality, a challenge for doctors to treat and cure. Illnesses, especially those that are difficult to cure, often possess their own mystique—they mirror society's fears, prejudices, and judgments. Illness is an intrusion of the chaos and confusion that lie at the center of our existence, always threatening to overwhelm us. Those who, like the leper, bear in their bodies the marks of death are reminders of our ever-present vulnerability, and are therefore shunned and shamed. Loneliness and shame can be even more debilitating than the physical aspects of illness.

In today's Gospel we see how those two aspects come together. Jesus' healing of the leper invites us to reflect on what precisely are our attitudes, our feelings, our behavior, especially in regard to people who, because of their illness, we tend to distance ourselves from—people who remind us of our own mortality, of the precariousness of life itself, people who bear in their bodies the shame that society associates with certain diseases, whether that be HIV-AIDS or mental illness, or some physical disfigurement—all illnesses which replicate the leprosy of Biblical times in their capacity to marginalize the sick and suffering.

The question in any society is how do people derive a sense of their own "wellness," of their self-worth, of who is healthy and who is not, and the degrees of difference between the two. Who are the ones who have "it" all together? Who are valued and who devalued? What is the barometer of social acceptance? This covers areas of life more extensive than physical health, but disease and illness are easy markers to focus on because the difference between the "well" and the "un-well" is so easily discerned. The same dynamics of fear, prejudice and judgment can be at work in so many of our socially constructed values. It comes down to a matter of social identity, of belonging, of feeling safe, excluding those whom we feel do not belong. Why, because they make us feel "unsafe;" they make us feel vulnerable in one way or another.

The miracles of Jesus provided not only a physical remedy for the person who was suffering, but also reconnected that healed person to society, to human

community, dissolving the wedge that had caused him or her to be shunned, because of their illness or disease. Jesus' acts of healing were powerful, not simply because they challenged the laws of nature, but because they challenged the norms and structures of society, as well. It was precisely this second factor that aroused the anger of Jesus' opponents—not that they doubted He was curing the sick, but that too often He was curing the wrong kinds of people, often in the wrong way—by touching them—and on the wrong day—the Sabbath.

So, Jesus' healing of the leper is more than a miracle, more than a spontaneous cure. Given the religious context of his day, it is a gesture of acceptance, of inclusion, of welcoming back into society the one who is seen by the Jewish community as "unclean," as cursed by God. Jesus explodes the distinction between "us" and "them," the "clean" and the "unclean." In Jewish law the leper was to be shunned so that what was "revolting" about him might not contaminate those who considered themselves as being "well," those who viewed themselves as being "clean," as "whole"--not because the Jews had any idea of contagion, but because the leper bore in his body the marks of death and decay, a reminder of the chaos of existence that had to be kept at bay.

In today's Gospel Jesus tells the lepers to show themselves to the priest to have it verified that they have indeed been cured. Jesus tells them to get the required piece of parchment that would allow them to return to their communities. One of them, the Samaritan, comes back giving thanks to God and Jesus says to him, "Your faith has saved you." Jesus commends the Samaritan, because when the Samaritan realized he had been cured, he also realized that he didn't need the priests' approval to say he is OK now. He knows in his very being that he is OK. He is the only one of all the lepers who were healed who gets what Jesus is all about. Jesus is about healing the whole person, not just the physical disease. The Samaritan has been fully healed. He has recognized in himself the worth, the value, the goodness that Jesus saw in him, and so has been set free from the shaming of the society in which he lived. The other nine still need the priests to verify their self-worth. They have internalized the sense of shame that the prejudices of that time were designed to impose upon them. The Samaritan, here, has no shame; his faith in all that Jesus is about has "saved" him.

For Jesus, no one should be ashamed of who or what they are. Every person is a child of God, and that is all that matters. There is a big difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is the acknowledgment of what I have done wrong, and so I can change that and do better. It is like a blinking red light on the dashboard of my life indicating something is wrong, something has to be fixed. Guilt can be a good thing. Shame is the belief that there is something wrong about who or what I am, something that I cannot change. Shame is never a good thing.

Jesus was never about shunning, but about welcoming, never exclusion but inclusion, and suffering is met not with judgment, not with blaming the victim, but with compassion, with support, with acceptance. So, for the follower of Jesus it is never permissible to exclude, shame or disgrace any human being. With Jesus, no one can be written off, excluded or abandoned. We are called to continue the healing ministry of Jesus. We may not be trained physicians to do the medical part, but it is that other dimension of enabling a person to feel whole, to be complete, to be fully acknowledged for who and what they are, that we can do. Let us pray that we do what we can to eradicate the shaming of any human being. Then, we will truly be a sign of the healing presence of Christ in our world today.