

Healing the exclusion

Leprosy was among the most dreaded diseases in the ancient world. It disfigured the body and consigned people to hellish isolation.

So when Jesus healed, the leprous man's life was turned upside down. Shunned and pushed-away since the day he was labeled a "leper," the man can begin to live again (Mark 1:40-45).

But there is another side to this story.

The gospel tells us that "(Jesus) touched the man." And "touching" had big consequences. "Touching" a leper was forbidden. Under penalty, it violated the law. It meant that Jesus was now considered "unclean," infected, contaminated. He may even have been suspected of having contracted leprosy himself.

To make matters worse, the healed man can't keep quiet. He goes on to tell everyone what happened. As a result, "unclean" Jesus cannot enter a town. Like a leper, he must remain "in deserted places." Any yet, people keep coming to him.

So think about it: The One you see on the cross was shunned and excluded like a leper. That cross of wood wasn't the only one Jesus carried in life.

The Son of God allowed himself to be treated like a leper to teach us that God loves those who are shunned and excluded. *We must do the same.*

I remember a woman who had two grown sons. Both her sons were diagnosed with mental illnesses.

Bonnie would often remind me about the stigma often attached to mental illness: "Tell someone that you have cancer and you will probably get a hug. But tell someone that you are Bipolar or that you struggle with depression, you'll get an uncomfortable glance and they'll change the subject." She'd recount the undercurrent of suspicion that dogged her at work: "Your home life must have really been messed-up when those boys were growing up!"

The only place where Bonnie found some relief was in her parish. "Instead of being shunned, I discovered companions. Instead of an ongoing critique of my parenting skills (or lack thereof), I got prayers." Her parish was the one healing place in her life.

Whenever I think of Bonnie and her struggles with her two sons, I remember: “Jesus allowed himself to be treated like a leper to teach us that God loves those who are shunned and excluded. *We must do the same.*”

Author Karen Armstrong once penned: **“Look at your life. Acknowledge what it is that gives you pain. Then refuse under any circumstances, whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else.”**

Like Jesus, who was no stranger to leprosy, may we use our pain, our crosses, to bring healing to others.

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