

Sermon Preached at the Episcopal Church of the Holy Comforter
2701 Park Road, Charlotte, NC 28209
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 4, 2010
Year C, Proper 9 RCL [2 Kings 5:1-14; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20]
The Reverend Scot McComas, Interim Supply Priest

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and redeemer. Amen.

The Old Testament reading today is about leprosy. We don't hear much about that today in the 21st century, but there still are places in this world where there are lepers. In the US, we know of one in Hawaii, specifically the island of Molokai. On Molokai there is a place called Kalaupapa, where those who had leprosy, also known as Hansen's Disease, were taken mostly in the 19th century and early part of the 20th century. It is a place in Molokai which is beyond a massive cliff—the largest cliff in the Pacific. So the only way to get there is by boat, or today, by plane. Still today, there are about twenty people living there—mostly in their 70's and 80's—who have been afflicted during most of, if not their whole, lives with leprosy.

In the 19th century, schooners used to anchor off the coast and throw the lepers into the water. Those who did not drown either swam to shore or were washed ashore and were taken care of by those who lived there. You may have heard of the great Belgian priest, Fr. Damien, who went there in the 1860's to love, to care for, and to bind up the wounds of all those who suffered from this terrible disease. Finally he succumbed to leprosy himself. Fr. Damien was canonized a saint by the Vatican on October 11, 2009.

Leprosy is a horrible and terrible disease. You have sores and scabs all over your body. You have infections from other opportunistic diseases. You are uncomfortable and in pain. We don't hear a lot about leprosy, and yet today, 2000 years later, there are still people who have this disease.

Now we may not be able to relate to leprosy in the physical sense. Yet, I would challenge you and say that each of us here, including me, has some form of emotional or spiritual leprosy—something in our past or our present that is eating away at us, ripping us apart, tearing us in mind, body, soul, or in our heart. So whether it is a relationship that has soured with a loved one, a spouse, a partner, a friend, a child, or a parent, no one is immune from this disease. Each has something that we have been carrying for years.

Fear can be leprous as well. In 2009 and 2010 we saw a fear of not knowing what was happening to our country, our banking system, our friends and family who were laid off. Many stayed in a job they didn't like so they could have a paycheck. There were those also who remained in a job just for health insurance.

Relationships can be leprous and eat away at us. Whether that relationship soured yesterday or 40 or 50 years ago, and whether those folks are alive or have gone on to the next world and we live with that memory, we do not have to allow that to eat away at us. It doesn't have to be a sore or an infection. Yet, a lot of times, our pride or doing things always the way we have done them get in the way of restoring a relationship. Some feel they have leprosy so far advanced that there is no cure for those relationships which have been negatively impacted.

Some of that thinking has affected our spiritual life. Some of us grew up in a church or religion where God was a hateful, vengeful God. Some of us grew up hearing that we should "fear the Lord," and yet the word 'fear,' from the Hebrew translation, is really "trust in the Lord." Yet we think of it otherwise when we hear "fear the Lord." Each of us has a history and relationships that have soured. We may not even remember what happened or if we were the cause of the rift or not. Remember that our faith is not just about the Crucifixion; it is about something beyond that. It is about the endless and hopeful possibilities that are before us. Our faith is about the Empty Tomb. It doesn't end with Good Friday. Who would want to worship a God whose symbol is only Good Friday?

As followers of Jesus Christ, we know he said, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." We don't have to carry that leprosy in us. We can cast all of that on our Lord Jesus Christ. We can cast it all at Golgotha at the foot of the Cross because he takes that burden on for us. But we have a part—we have to give it to him—he doesn't come and take it from us. We give it to him because he is waiting for us to recognize that we can't do it alone. He is the one to carry it. Our faith says that he will always take that yoke upon him.

Our body is our temple; it's the temple of God. We pray to God in mind, spirit, and body. If we have so much of this other leprous material inside us, how can we have a true, full, and abundant relationship with God?

This reminds me of the time I spent in Miami, Florida from 1999-2002 teaching at an Episcopal school. I taught an eighth grade class called "Religion and Ethics." I remember one time in a class, one girl said about another girl, "I hate her!" I replied, "Really? Why do you hate her?" The answer was about her stealing her boyfriend or some drama like that. I said, "Well, that wasn't very nice. But do you *really* hate her? Deep down inside, do you *really* hate her? Do you want those words coming out of your mouth? Do you want that in your body? Do you want to carry that inside you?" "Well, no I really don't," she said. "OK, let's think of another word, because language is powerful." She came up with, "I dislike her." I said, "OK, that's fine. We don't have to like everyone."

There are some of you here who may not like each other. That's OK, but you do need to love each other, through that *agape* love Christ gives us. It's

impossible to like everyone; we're human. But think about what it means to have the word "hate" inside you and to carry that around. That can turn into negative pain, stress, cancer, heart disease. I was talking with a man recently, who had two heart attacks within a year of each other because of stress. It was not normal stress as we all have—it was because he was receiving so much hate. We don't have to carry that, my friends. Our Lord says to give it to him—"For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

So I would suggest today to think about one thing you're carrying, just one, whether it be a relationship or something else, and as we pray and confess our sins and as we come to the altar and kneel to receive our Lord's body and blood, let the body and blood of our Lord go into your body with one less piece of baggage you are carrying and give that to God. Or at least say, "God, I'm going to try. I need your help, because I can't do it myself." And we're not meant to; and that's the beauty of our faith. Because if we could do it, we wouldn't need Jesus. We need our Lord Jesus Christ to help us. He has already taken that upon himself.

So give your leprosy to Christ so you can truly have that peace which passes all understanding that our Lord gives us, as we give everything to him. Amen.