

Sermon 23C 2019: God Touches the Untouchable, Go and Do Likewise

Introduction: All Infected

When my brothers and I were growing up at Stephen C. Foster Elementary School;

The most dreaded disease wasn't chicken pox, the measles or the mumps;

It was a much more subtle, mysterious disorder and highly contagious.

There was no vaccine, no antidote, no inoculation for protection.

None of the older boys ever told us what would happen to you if you contracted the disease;

But the mere mention of it struck terror into grade school boys' hearts;

It was, we were told, a fate worse than death;

And the only way to be safe was to keep your distance;

And to place anyone infected with it in strict quarantine.

Fortunately, the carriers were easily recognizable, because it was only carried by girls;

Every girl, except our Mom and two older sisters, was loaded with it;

Still today I am not sure of the precise medical term, but we called it cooties.

All a carrier had to do was touch you, breathe on you, get close to you and you'd be infected;

None of us was crazy enough to touch someone with cooties;

And if one of us was touched, then we were isolated until it wore off;

And only then were we allowed to rejoin polite society on the playground.

Human beings need to be touched and separation and isolation affect us in hurtful ways;

One of my favorite marriage counselors and authors, Gary Smalley cites studies

Showing that people who experience meaningful touch on a regular basis;

Have a longer life expectancy than those of us who don't;

Touch and closeness are important and we naturally describe intimacy and relationships

In spatial terms – being close to someone versus being distant from someone.

Psychologists have found that the greater the physical distance couples maintain in conversation;
The more likely that they are dissatisfied with their marriage;
And the more likely they are to get divorced.

Part of my pre-marital work with a couple planning to be married here;
Is to see whether they take separate chairs or sit near or far from one another
On the couch in my office – closer is better.

And yet in every culture and through all time, we; you and I declare certain people untouchable;
Cowboy fans; Democrats or Republicans or both;
Persons from a different race, culture, sexuality, social background than ours;
Divorced persons; widows, never marrieds; felons freed from prison;
Persons struggling with mental illness, cancer or any illness;
Can become untouchables and we cut them out of our lives.

And all of us, at certain stages or in certain settings, feel like or are treated like untouchables;
Treated as unacceptable, unworthy outsiders ourselves;
And if you've never been treated this way then you haven't been paying attention.

Today's Gospel is the story of ten persons who were infected with a horrible disease;
Nobody would go near them, let alone touch them;
But then Somebody did and restored them to community;
And the entire Gospel promise is contained in this story:
A world that has been infected with a horrible disease;
But God has touched it; it is your story and mine.

Jesus and the Ten Lepers

The men in the story from Luke's Gospel had leprosy;
By Jewish law it could have been any skin disease, but let's consider it as it's written.

The disease begins with a sense of lethargy or tiredness;

Then pain in the joints and splotchy patches and bumps that change the face in ugly ways;

When the sores spread the smell is awful and internal sores can rob you of your voice.

The real, physical damage from leprosy came from a loss of feeling;

And as a result someone could burn themselves without knowing it;

Could lose fingers and toes from accidents or the cold and do nothing about it.

The first sign of leprosy in Jesus' day was regarded as a death sentence;

And the Old Testament provides laborious descriptions of the disease;

And the isolation and separation that was required;

The law was quite clear – DON'T TOUCH!

By Jesus' day, the religious leaders had carried the isolation and separation much further;

If a leper came into someone's home, the home might have to be destroyed;

If a leper was in the town, it was permissible to throw stones and eggs;

Lepers were kept at a distance: they knew it and so did everyone else.

Imagine the thought of never being touched again;

Never being allowed to hug your spouse, your child, a close friend;

To never feel the arm of your father or mother draped over your shoulder.

And leprosy was not just a physical disease;

Like all disease in Jesus' day it carried a moral stigma;

It was assumed to be a curse from God for your sins or your family's sins;

But as other diseases were said to be healed, leprosy had to be cleansed;

Because lepers weren't just sick, they were unclean, defiled.

That's why Luke writes that the ten lepers kept their distance from Jesus as He approached;

They called out, implying they are far away, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

The lepers had no doubt Jesus could heal them;

They just wondered whether Jesus would heal them.

And here's where Jesus is very different from the religious leaders of His day;

And from those of us whose self-importance and self-righteousness shape our lives;

The religious leaders of Jesus' day chose a strategy of isolation from lepers;

And from Gentiles and tax collectors and sinners and women,

And from anyone different from them.

The idea being that because sickness, sin, suffering and differences are contagious;

The best way to avoid them was to separate yourself from those kinds of people;

And from the places they went or were allowed to go so you're not exposed.

I get it; I understand the appeal of this strategy; Sin spreads like the common cold;

Get around a bunch of complainers and what do we start to do?

Run with the bad crowd and who do we become?

Spiritual and physical quarantine is the only answer.

The problem is when we isolate people from our midst, from our community, from our touch;

Then we start building up an "us" versus "them" environment;

A world where pride, exclusion and self-righteousness reign and love dies;

Humility, compassion and generosity of spirit all suffocate;

And anyone who is different from us is seen as someone beneath us;

Someone that needs to be kept at a distance and isolated and sometimes destroyed.

Jesus goes the other direction, which is why he's so loved by sinners and the sick

And so despised by the religious leaders of His day.

Jesus was imminently approachable, open, accepting, inviting and not just with lepers;
With everyone from lepers to children to tax collectors to women to Gentiles;
To people like you and me;
Jesus is imminently approachable and actually goes looking for those
Whom the religious leaders would call lost and sinful and untouchable.

And when the ten lepers call out to Jesus to have mercy on them, He does;
Jesus heals them and gives them back their lives.

And when the one leper comes to give thanks to God, laying himself at Jesus' feet to thank Jesus
Jesus welcomes his thanks and welcomes him as the beloved child of God he is;
And then sends the man on his way to his new life.

That's the Gospel in its entirety: Jesus came to live among those of us who were untouchable;
To show us the face of God and the way of life with God;
To come close to take on our sins and suffering and isolation through the cross;
So that we and all others may be drawn into the life that is really life;
Whoever we are, whatever we've done, however different we may be

Welcoming the Untouchable

In a contagious world, we learn to keep our distance;
If we get too close to someone else's suffering, disease, isolation, differentness;
We might catch it ourselves; we might get infected by their pain and loss.

And though it may not be convenient or comfortable or easy all the time;
It is only when you and I get close enough to catch another person's hurt;
That they will be close enough to catch our love.

Jesus didn't call His followers into a life of quarantine;

He called us to be a kind of hospital, a community for the world.

Imagine a hospital where the doctors say, "This has been a successful day. I wasn't infected.

My patients may be loaded with filthy germs and disease, but I kept them all outside.

They may be dying, but at least I didn't touch one of them; I didn't get infected."

Jesus wasn't infected by the lepers he healed or the sinners he welcomed and forgave;

Or the unlovable he loved; no they were infected by Him;

The life that flowed in and through Jesus was so strong

That leprosy and sinfulness and suffering and differences

Simply could not coexist with it.

You see, sin and suffering are not the only things that are contagious;

So is enthusiasm, gentleness, kindness, hospitality, laughter, grace and love;

Get around someone with some of those qualities and you and I will be changed

Because contagion works both ways.

The secret of the spiritual life, the Christian life, the Community for the world;

Is not to isolate ourselves from sin and suffering and persons different from us;

That would be a lonely life indeed and would be impossible, even if we wanted to

The secret is to be so filled with the love and power and grace of God

So that in touching the world, instead of it infecting us, we infect it;

And become a community for the world where all are welcomed, all are loved;

All are brought into the realm of God's love and healing and grace.

So let me invite you to welcome and draw close to the people

God sends your way today and every day.

To draw close to whomever God sends so that you can offer them

The love and grace and kindness and laughter and hospitality that God has offered

And given every one of us;

The world is waiting for us Christians to act more and more like Jesus;

And when we do, God will use us to draw all people to Him;

And to build God's community here on earth.

Cooties turned out to be a falsehood, so are our differences;

For we are all the beloved children of God.

Amen.