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Date: October 26, 2014
Sermon Title: The Leper's Curse
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 17:11-19

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

In 1721 a smallpox epidemic hit Boston. Fifty percent of the population got the smallpox; 10 percent of the city died. One of the heroes fighting that epidemic was Cotton Mather, Congregationalist pastor, villain of the Salem witch trials. But on smallpox, he was ahead of his time, on the cutting edge of inoculation. His own slave (yes, he had slaves) told him about vaccination/inoculation, so he listened. To his credit, Cotton Mather led people to attack the disease, using vaccination and quarantine to save thousands of lives. Others preferred fear, prejudice, ignorance, hiding behind bad theology and bad science.

"The Leper's Curse" is my sermon title for today. Whenever something big happens, especially something big and bad, we'll say it's of "Biblical proportions." This probably comes from Noah's flood, a rainstorm of "Biblical proportions" that flooded the whole earth. Or, Moses's 10 Plagues, so severe that they changed the Pharaoh's mind. Or, Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones. The

remnants of a battle of such “Biblical proportions” that it forever scarred the landscape. Battles, storms and plagues are inevitably of “Biblical proportions.” Events on an epic scale, often with theological overtones,

Ebola. Ebola is today’s leprosy, and leprosy was once the most feared Biblical scourge. Ebola is today’s leprosy, a disease that catches our attention, that spikes the imagination, that frightens the population, that carries with it a stigma of “Biblical proportions.”

You don’t come to church to hear my advice on how to handle an epidemic or whether there should be a travel ban on flights in and out of West Africa. But church can be a good place to get advice on how to handle fear, uncertainty, worry, even panic . . . and how to do it with hope and even to be helpful.

The Scripture lesson we just heard is usually trotted out around Thanksgiving. Remember the story. Ten lepers approach Jesus and ask for help. He heals them, tells them to go to the Temple to get certification of being healed. Only one of the 10 said, “Thank you.” So it’s an obvious Thanksgiving sermon waiting to happen. It gives us a chance to celebrate people who are truly grateful and to wag our finger at people who are ungrateful, take everything for granted, never say, “Thanks.”

But today I’d rather focus on the leprosy. It is a disease of “Biblical proportions” because it’s about the only disease named in the Bible. We don’t hear about cancer in the Bible or heart disease or even the common cold. People died, but there wasn’t much diagnosis going on. Leprosy got diagnosed and named. People knew it and dreaded it. Leprosy, nowadays called “Hansen’s Disease, attacks the nerve endings—fingers, toes, the extremities—and the disease, along with accidents caused by the disease, leaves people disfigured.

It appears to be—it isn’t—but it appears to be a flesh-eating disease because fingers and toes and even the nose appear to be eaten away. It scared everybody, leading, perhaps, to the world’s first quarantine. People with leprosy were forced to live outside of town, away from people, often in caves, living with other lepers. Their world was confined to their sickness. Sometimes they were allowed out of quarantine, private hell, to beg, allowed to walk about, sometimes ringing a bell and shouting, “Unclean, unclean” to clear people away, while picking up some donations along the way. It was a pitiful existence.

Our Bible story tells us that there was some room for miracle, healing, or misdiagnosis. It was possible if a person felt he was clear of the disease, to

show himself to the Temple priest and get “cleared” and then to reenter society. Interesting parallels. A flesh-eating disease, fright and fear, quarantines.

For those who are new to our church, we are very much involved with mission work in India. The founder of our work was a wonderful Indian Christian, Azariah, and in all our years together he never asked for anything. Instead, he would casually expose me to opportunities, or needs, or people and then let God, or guilt, take over. That was my introduction to leprosy.

One summer I led a Habitat for Humanity work camp to India, and during lunch one day, he brought by a group of lepers and introduced them. They told us their story. It just so happened that that afternoon we were driving by the bridge underpass where they were all living—families, elderly, kids, babies. The government had built them some houses, not much bigger than an old New Englander’s outhouse, so poorly constructed that in less than a year, they had to abandon the houses. They were literally falling in on them, so the lepers took shelter under a bridge.

“That’s nice,” I thought. Yes, literally, that’s what I thought. That was the level of my sensitivity. I just figured it was part of the cultural experience for our American visitors, short-term missionaries, Habitat work camp. Take them to India, bring in a sitar player to serenade them, make them eat curry, have some native dancers perform for us at night, get henna tattoos, show them a leper or two, and help build some houses. But *not* for lepers.

Lepers didn’t meet our criteria. Habitat’s worldwide success was built in two models. One, everyone helps build his own house, “Sweat equity,” we called it. Two, everybody paid for his own house. The whole idea was to instill pride, responsibility, home ownership. You paid for it. You helped build it.

But the lepers had no money, and most of them had no fingers. They couldn’t do “sweat equity,” they couldn’t make payments; they weren’t eligible for a Habitat house. End of discussion.

I was president of Habitat Worldwide. I knew the rules. Thus began one of the more interesting days in my life. My Habitat work camp refused to work. They did a work stoppage, led by my daughter. They literally sat down and refused to move. “Dad,” my daughter said with oomph, “Dad, you’re president, you can do what you want!” Well, yes, that is a 16-year-old’s view of the work *and* of her dad. But to quite a degree, she was right. We are all able to do more than we think we can. We let ourselves too easily get bogged down by rules, traditions, politics, fears.

Maybe the one fear we should all have is letting down your daughter. So we changed the rules. We, FOCI, agreed to raise the money to build houses for the lepers. And we agreed to accept the lepers' most humble efforts, even the effort of a prayer and music as their "sweat equity."

Today, FOCI cares for 250 people in our Leprosy Village. Dr. Longstreth's January medical team has made all sorts of improvements. Alida's annual FOCI trip members always spend time with the leprosy families, a time of worship and gratitude and compassion.

Ebola is today's Leprosy. We don't yet understand it; we are understandably scared about it; we know we have to stop it. Let me get the hot political potato off the table so I can go back to sounding like a pastor. Yes, it makes sense to shut off travel to and from the Ebola hot spots. Anything you want to stop has to be stopped at the source. The arguments against it seem silly. They say it will hurt the economy of those countries. Well, first, Ebola is already hurting their economy. Second, we can fix the economy; we can't fix dead people. Israel and Gaza just spent the summer hurting their local economies, and now we're plowing billions into West Africa to help build up their countries . . . after Ebola is stopped. In short: contain it. Flood it with compassion. Rebuild it. That's our "mission."

I mention "mission" on purpose. I think for most Americans, our first full-blown awareness of Ebola came when missionaries came down with it. Yes, missionaries. Christian doctors and nurses from America and Spain were the first "Westerners" to get it and, blessedly, the first to be healed of it. Long before Ebola got our attention, missionaries were there, on the front lines, serving the most hurting, most vulnerable, most at-risk people on earth. Long before the HazMat suits and the state-of-the-art quarantine rooms and the experimental drugs and vaccines, missionaries were there because that's what Jesus would do.

Most of you know my own "missionary" background. My doctorate is in African studies. I founded "Friends of Christ in India," I was president of Habitat for Humanity International for years. I was president of the Overseas Ministries Study Center for years. And yet I wasn't born into the world of mission. I came to it kicking and screaming. The churches I grew up in taught me nothing about mission. The seminary I went to had nothing to do with mission. By the time I became a pastor, frankly, I saw mission as a pain in the neck that sucked money out of the local church. Then I started seeing mission for myself, up close and personal, near and far, the missions and the missionaries, the work and the workers. And, yes, the glory and the danger.

I first started to go to Africa in 1975 and to India in 1983. One common denominator in both places was that I kept being taken to cemeteries where dead missionaries were buried. Men and women and children from America and England, mostly young, middle-aged at best. They said in the old days, in the 1800s, when missionaries shipped out overseas, they'd pack their belongings in a casket, knowing they were in for the long haul and would probably give their lives to Christ. Even in my experience, I met heroic missionaries who faced every danger imaginable: terrorism, epidemics, civil war, rape, beatings.

That is the nature of mission. You run toward the danger. After 9/11, we began to give much more attention and honor to our "first-responders." The firemen and police and emergency medical teams and everyday civilians who headed toward the Twin Towers, toward the danger, toward that epidemic of death in lower Manhattan. On Thursday, when the terrorist attacked the Canadian Parliament, there is an amazing video of the murderer running from the War Memorial to the Parliament, and right along side someone was chasing him. On Friday, at yet another in this epidemic of school killings, we saw police heading into the school, into the storm, into the sickness and danger. And we applaud them.

Our American soldiers probably don't call themselves "missionaries," and the amazing charity "Doctors Without Borders" wouldn't think of themselves as "missionaries," but minus the religious components, they are. America has sent 600 soldiers to West Africa, headed toward 4,000. In classic American military lingo, they are headed "into harm's way." They are there in our name, we pay for them, they have a "mission" to do. Doctors Without Borders have been on the front line of human tragedy, living up their name. They were born in the Paris riots of 1968, came to maturity in 1971, after the Biafran Civil War in Nigeria. They wanted to create a medical "mission" that would always run toward patients, run toward the danger, no matter the politics or the risks. That's their "mission."

Foolhardy? Yes. But St. Paul dares us to be "fools for Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:18), foolhardy. Foolish and hardy. That's what we do. At the same time, society has a right to be protected from our "foolishness." If the price of serving on the front lines of Ebola is to be quarantined for 21 days after, pay the price. That's fair. But be proud of it. Proud of those who go. Proud of that level of love.

Jesus set the standard, embracing the Ebola of his day. I saw a photo of President Obama embracing Nina Pham, the American nurse who just recovered from Ebola and finished her quarantine. Obama embraced her. He touched her. Jesus spent his ministry touching the untouchables of his day.

Beginning with the lepers, but not ending there. He embraced the “social lepers also, the outcasts, the folks who literally and figuratively were kept at a long distance. The Samaritan woman. The woman caught in adultery. The hated Roman centurion. The despised tax collector. The unclean bleeding woman, the demon-possessed man named Legion. Every single one of them made people’s skin crawl. Every single one of them, detested, avoided, even feared.

Some of us are old enough to have lived through the AIDS epidemic that was both hysteria and epidemic. I first ran across AIDS in Africa in the ‘70s in Zaïre, the Congo. When I was deep in the bush, in the rural areas, I would be taken on a walking tour of villages. People would bring their loved ones outdoors—20, 30 years old—lay them on a mat in front of their hut, ask me to greet them, pray for them. I asked what was wrong. People would say, the “thinning disease.” A few years later, the “thinning disease” had a name: AIDS.

I was a pastor up near Boston at the time, when the AIDS scare was at its height. Dentists refused to treat its victims. Nobody wanted to hug them. And when they died, funeral directors refused to bury them, and some families refused to acknowledge them.

So I think it was a big deal when the president hugged the nurse. It wasn’t long before Obama was criticized. Someone on one station said he was overheard saying to the nurse, “Let’s have a hug for the cameras.” Well, yes, exactly! The hug *is* for the cameras. What Jesus did was for the cameras. Every touch of an untouchable was for the cameras. When he stood with the lepers, when the bleeding lady reached out to him, when he talked with the adulterous woman and the Samaritan, when he sat with all manner of sinners, when he helped the hated Roman, it was all for the cameras. It was for public consumption. It was for us.

Two thousand years from now nobody will be talking about Obama hugging the nurse. But 2,000 years from now, people will still be talking about Jesus with the lepers.

Jesus set the standard. Doctors Without Borders are following Jesus’s steps. Our American soldiers in West Africa are following Jesus’s steps. The missionary doctors and nurses are following Jesus’s steps.

I mentioned earlier our work in India. Right after Christmas, Alida is leading a group of 12 to be with all of our mission—high school kids, college kids, and adults. In mid-January, Dr. George Longstreth, a longtime member of our church, is leading his 16th medical team to our FOCI work. They’ll do free

surgeries and medical care for 1,000 people in two weeks. Dr. Longstreth's partner is another Connecticut doctor, Dr. Joe, like George, a man of great faith and great compassion. Joe has cancer, lung cancer, a recurrence. That's a tough diagnosis. In addition, both George and Joe are into their 70s. They have winter homes down south.

What on earth are they doing in India? They don't even stay in a hotel. They have 12-14 hour workdays, they have a steady diet of curry, bananas, and bad beer, and they each pay a couple thousand for the privilege. What are they doing in India?

When some doctor looks me in the eye and gives me a tough diagnosis with the word "cancer" in it, I'm going to do three things. I'm going to sit in a dark corner and be miserable for a week. Then I'm going out to the backyard and beat up a tree. Then I'm going to Pepe's Pizza and eat a slice of every kind of pizza they have. I'm not flying to India.

So what makes George and Joe tick? Jesus. Like Jesus, they go where the patients are. They go where they're needed. We're not all like Joe and George. We're not all Doctors Without Borders. We're not all soldiers or missionaries serving in West Africa. We're not all firemen rushing toward the Twin Towers on 9/11. But like my lepers from India, there's one thing we can all do: we can pray. We can give. We can pray some more.

Here's a prayer for right now:

Loving and Holy God, hear our prayer. Heal the sick, protect all the medical workers, use our soldiers, inspire our scientists, guide them to a cure, return them all to life and love. Bless the world you created.

Amen