

The story begins: “As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’

Don’t ever think for a moment that death is the worst thing that can happen to a person. It’s not. And the scene this morning is a case in point. These human beings walked the earth. They breathed and ate. They had hopes and fears and aspirations and feelings just like you and me. Yet, there was a tragic sense in which they were already dead. They were walking dead. Leprosy was the most dreaded of all ancient diseases. It ate away at the body and left its victim maimed and disfigured. There was no known cure. In their hopes for a family life, a useful occupation, plans for the future—they were dead men and women, forced to live on the outside of society.

Their situation was made worse because leprosy was believed to be highly contagious. Actually, we know today that it is not. But ancient superstitions die hard. The scripture made it quite clear that as these lepers approached Jesus they stood at a far distance. Jewish law clearly prescribed that a leper could not get within fifty yards of a clean person. Everywhere these outcasts journeyed they heard familiar words yelled out: “Unclean,” “Leper.” Some hurled stones to keep them away. Leprosy was a serious public health concern but it was tinged with the religious element of ritual uncleanness. So it was that they not only had to live with their physical handicap, but they were also isolated. They had to live in the hell of loneliness and in fear for their lives. That can do more to drain a person’s energy for living than the most horrible of diseases.

Now the thing that is interesting about this story is that these lepers are traveling with a Samaritan. Not only is this man a leper, but he is outside of the circle of acceptability, because of who he was born to be—someone considered not fully human, not someone who could eat at the same table as the rest of society.

He has racial characteristics that set him outside of society.

His orientation is that of someone who was born with different characteristics; in this case, he is deemed impure, and this was so even if he did not have leprosy.

Maybe there are some people here today who can remember what it was like to discover that you did not have the same access to your rightful place at the table. Maybe it is because of your gender; perhaps it is about race, or status...or even sexual orientation. Perhaps you can remember how it felt to begin to discover that at a very early age—to see others who walked about with a sense of entitlement, and to begin to know that yours was an uphill, even a dangerous walk amongst the status quo and the privileged.

This would be a walk not unlike this Samaritan’s, and we have to add to this that he traveled to the cries of, “Unclean!” wherever he went because of a disease that was most debilitating to live with, and terrible to see.

Well, one day these lepers came before Jesus, walking as he was between Galilee and Jerusalem, which is an extremely long walk. When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.

In order to be made ritually clean, to be accepted back into their communities, they had to go back and present themselves to their priests. Once this was done, they could be enfolded back into their communities.

Except for one. One leper made clean on the road who could not turn to the accepted religious institution to present himself. Whoever he was, and wherever he was on his journey, he was not welcome here. The priests to whom the nine other lepers went, represented, after all, the religious institution that condemned the Samaritan—preached against him, reviled him, allowed no grace, no love, no acceptance for him whatsoever. The people were taught from childhood to demean and feel superior to the Samaritan.

He was on his own, healed from leprosy but not from the effects of prejudice. Where WOULD he go? To whom could he turn? And of course the story tells us:

“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.*”

Have you ever looked at someone, heard them speak or perhaps seen them involved selflessly in some community or even family-healing situation, and recognized that you were in the presence of something that was truly, “authentic.”?

And in those liminal moments when we stand on the threshold between the ordinary and the real, can you feel what it is like to truly recognize the presence of the authentic voice amongst the chatter?

Some voice, some instinct, some gnosis (or “secret knowledge”) caused this man to turn back, because he knew that there at the feet of this man, this Jesus, he was in the presence of the “authentic.” All he had was Jesus.

And Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was there no-one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

The others were back at home, they were becoming re-enmeshed with community, family, with friends and the center of society—their faith tradition. Perhaps they thought they had found what was authentic there—you really can’t blame them. And still, it was this one outsider who, perhaps because circumstances forced him to question more, to be more discerning...turned back and found himself in the only authentic presence he could know.

It was there that Jesus said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you whole.”

All this man has is Jesus. He doesn’t have the temple in Jerusalem, or the priests there to present offerings to and be declared clean.

All he has is Jesus. He doesn’t have a congregation. He doesn’t have the support of that community—he is on the outside.

All he has is Jesus. And he is the one who turns back from the religious institution to the real figure; the presence of the authentic before whom he gives thanks. And it is here with the authentic, the real, the compassionate one—where he hears that it is his own faith; not a doctrinal one, not one imbued with ritual or weighed down in legalisms, where true grace has set him free.

Now, we could talk today about how any number of people might relate to this Samaritan, this person outside the lines, but because of what has been happening in this past week, I want to tie this into something that is very disturbing to me. We need to find ways to guide young people to discover what is real and authentic, and to walk away from the places where they are outcasts.

We are experiencing an anti-gay bullying epidemic, which is being leveled at young teenagers and pre-teens, and it must be addressed. In Los Angeles, it is estimated that up to 4,000 lgbt youth live on the streets because they have fled or have been kicked out of their homes.

After being bullied, taunted, and accused of being gay, thirteen year-old Seth Walsh finally had enough. On September 19, this seemingly happy and artistic California youth tied a rope around his neck and hung himself from a tree in his own backyard. He died after spending nine days in a coma. Investigators interviewing the teenagers who taunted Seth for being gay concluded that no crime was committed. I would disagree.

Because sadly, Seth isn't the only one. In the last few weeks alone, we've learned of five gay youth who have killed themselves—all after being the victims of homophobic harassment and/or bullying. Seth died just days after another thirteen year-old Texan boy, Asher Brown, shot himself over anti-gay bullying. An eighteen year-old Rutgers University student, Tyler Clementi, jumped off a bridge in New Jersey after a cyber-humiliation. Fifteen year-old Billy Lucas, from Indiana, hung himself in his barn after repeated bullying at his school. And on October 1, Raymond Chase, a nineteen year old from Rhode Island, hung himself in his dorm after being harassed.

Choosing to speak against gay and lesbian people on the Sunday after five gay adolescents committed suicide, the second highest leader in the Mormon church, Elder Boyd Packer, gave a sermon to a wide audience last Sunday that must have been heard by troubled young lgbt Mormons, and the culture around them that scorns them. This kind of talk, like pulpit-thumping all over America, only further alienates our youth and potentially contributes to suicides of even more vulnerable young people. It incites the violence and bullying that often drives them to suicide by repeating lies disproven by both science and the experience of millions of Americans who know their lgbt neighbors and care about them.

Co-incidentally, yesterday, three gay young men were held and tortured in NYC by a gang in the Bronx. When the girls who hung around with the assailants were questioned, they said of the torturers, "The young men were 'the nicest ever.' They even went to church." Of course they did. That's where they learned this hate.

My colleague, Dan Furmanky, writes that, "While schoolyard bullies should be held accountable for their actions, we need to look at the root, not the bloom of the problem. The root lies in all those who preach that same-sex attraction is a sin, whether from a bully pulpit or a pulpit looking out onto rows of pews. Far too many anti-gay pundits, clergy, and politicians are not only empowering listeners to act against perceived sin, but also incentivizing intolerance.

"We cannot stand on the side of love if we relegate ourselves to the sidelines, afraid to 'insult' people of faith who are enablers of the abuse that far too many lgbt people endure. Religious leaders, church, synagogue and mosque-goers, must be challenged to agree that publicly breaking down the spirit of vulnerable young people— setting the table for their despair, isolation, and demise—is a perversion of God's love.

"There is a time to listen in love to our brothers and sisters who have a different opinion, and a time for us to say 'enough' to the shame that they cast. That time is now more than ever."

I think we can all grieve over these tragic deaths. I am convinced that we must have the courage to witness and name the violence in our midst, even if, and especially when, it rises up from religious institutions with which we share a bond.

No-one, like the lepers in this story, should have to live in the hell of loneliness and in fear for their lives. That can do more to drain a person's energy for living than the most horrible of diseases.

I also think we should turn grief into something transformative; to move from general intentions into something concrete. This Wednesday night we will have a forum featuring storytellers who reveal their own experience of growing up lgbt, along with law professor

Katherine Darmer, who will update us on the legal issues around equality for all Americans. On November 7, All Saints Sunday, we will have a special program after church to remember these young teens who felt they had nowhere to go but to end their lives, show a new documentary called, “Bullied,” and invite special guests to form a panel discussion.

In the face of unspeakable violence, how do we turn our overwhelming feelings of anger and sadness into concrete practices for faith and justice? Where is that which feels, “authentic” for us?

There was once a certain Samaritan who was sent ahead with the others to show himself to the priests, but this one Samaritan turned back. He turned back because he had to. Perhaps he was afraid of the treatment he knew he would receive if he showed his face there. Maybe something told him to go back to the source—the real healer, historic foundation, teacher, leader and guide. All that man had was Jesus.

Maybe that’s all we have today. Maybe that’s all we need—I know that’s true for teens growing up all over this country, as it was for me, and maybe it was for you for any number of reasons. Many people feel, and rightly so, that they’re on the other side looking in through stained-glass windows that only cut and hide the light. All we really have, past the church doctrine, ritual, enshrined traditions, and for many, the signed divorce papers first with Science and the failed second marriage with Reason—at the root of Christianity what we have is Jesus.

If the doctrine of the church is all tied up in defining who is in and who is out—if they’re too disordered to be healthy on the topic of what makes human love and family, you have to walk to a place where you find in your heart what is authentic; what is real. As Christians, all you have is Jesus, the one who tells you that it is your *own* faith and understanding that has made you whole.

If you show yourself to the priest and he tells you that women can’t be equal leaders with men, you have to turn away, go back down the road to find the source of what is authentic and real. All you have is Jesus—the teaching, healing presence who spoke equally to women, and who loved inclusively.

Like the Samaritan, if we find ourselves visiting, or perhaps growing up in, congregations that don’t welcome us because of who we are, then we have to shake the dust from our feet, walk back on down the road to find the source of that which is truly authentic.

This is the voice of justice and peace, it is the presence of love and acceptance, it is the spirit of hospitality and welcome to the Samaritan, or whoever the undocumented visitor might be, and where this is not found, that’s when we know that Jesus has left the building.

We don’t have to go back to such places to be made ritually clean, or sanctified, or even born-again. All the Samaritan had was Jesus, and Jesus tells the Samaritan that his own faith has made him whole.

Our *own* faith...as *we* understand it and how it proves itself in its own authenticity; by how it enriches our lives and makes us more open and loving people. Authentic. Simple. Unadorned. Not something created by the *Who’s Who of Tortured Literalists* over a barbecue with *The Society for the Preservation of Cultural Prejudices*, and served up as the theology for the First Church of the Status Quo.

Whoever we are...wherever we are...imperfect, often broken and hurting, caught both in lies and jealousies as well as in soaring moments of authenticity; desiring to be loving and strong exactly as who we were born be in order to live our lives...our own faith as *we* understand it, as we walk to the places in our hearts where we find the authentic shining before us; yes our *own* faith makes us whole in spite of who we are, and folks, that to me, is Amazing Grace.

***Sermon Resources***

Lorri L. Jean, Chief Executive Officer, L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center

Samuel Chu, Executive Director, California Faith for Equality

Dan Furmanky, Standing on the Side of Love

***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.”