

**Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany**

**February 15, 2009**

**Christ Church, New Brunswick**

The Rev. Joan E. Fleming

Readings:

2 Kings 5: 1-14

I Corinthians 9: 24-27

Mark 1: 40-45

In the mid-1980s, I served as a chaplain under supervision at Somerset Medical Center, and it was there that I began hearing about a terrifying new disease. People spoke in hushed tones about Somerset being one of the few hospitals in New Jersey to which patients infected with this horror had begun cautiously being admitted.

A veil of secrecy surrounded the scourge of AIDS in those early years when frantic efforts to track and contain it frequently collided with the impulse to compassion. *Keep your distance*, and above all, *Do Not Touch*, were the prerequisites of pastoral care for victims of this dread condition, rules that had a severely inhibiting effect on any genuine expression of care, any bond of common humanity. I remember sitting awkwardly on a chair a good four feet away from an emaciated young man and trying to “draw him out,” an effort he politely but firmly rebuffed. My discomfort was all too evident, inspired by the public fear, loathing, and repulsion that had made of him and “his kind” pariahs ... outcasts.

In that era, many parishes experienced a jump in the number of people choosing to intinct rather than drink from the common cup, despite reassuring articles in church publications. Irrational fear often seemed stronger than rational caution, stronger than Christian compassion. A General Ordination Exam question in those years, “Do you consider AIDS to be God’s punishment for immorality?” reflected a widespread public religious sentiment.

*A leper came to him begging Jesus, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him ...*

Jesus would have been entirely "justified" if he had kept the leper at arm's length: that he would actually touch him must have seemed incredible to the bystanders. For leprosy inspired at least the same level of fear and repulsion in Jesus' day as AIDS did twenty-five years ago. There were no known ways to halt its spread, and because all diseases were thought to have their origin in personal sin, a leper could be declared "clean" only by religious authority. Can you imagine Jesus sitting gingerly on the edge of his chair to avoid getting too close to an AIDS-infected patient? I certainly can't.

Jesus astonished, even shocked, people by his direct, fearless approach with people, both emotionally *and* physically. Too often, we are not even mildly surprised by actions that must have made his hearers gape. Our readings contain some other surprises that scarcely register with us, let alone astonish. Mere familiarity numbs our capacity to be shocked, as we know all too well from the ease with which we often toss appeals featuring emaciated children, miserable refugees, and other victims of global catastrophe into the waste-basket.

We might want to consider the serving maid in the story of that very different leper, Naaman, the greatest soldier in Syria. Evidently he has been receiving huge bonuses for quite a while, one for each of his military victories, and re-gifting some of his loot would make scarcely a dent in his holdings. He is willing to part with 750 lbs of silver and 1,500 lbs of gold, no less, in exchange for a cure—an indication of just how desperate he is to be rid of his leprosy (so far apparently at an early stage).

But we digress: the little serving maid is being obscured by Naaman's larger than life presence. For starters, she is a prisoner, a battle trophy, taken at sword's point or worse from her home in Israel. She may well have been raped or abused, just as female captives have been from time immemorial (rape is being used quite literally as a weapon of war in the conflict in Congo, where as many as 90% of the women in some villages have been subjected to it). So, first surprise: astonishingly, our little slave girl appears to be working quite willingly for her mistress, even though under duress, and she seems, also surprisingly, to have a genuine concern for both Naaman and his wife. She thinks with pride, and no doubt longing, of the wonder-working prophet back home, certain that he would be up to the challenge of healing her master. "He could cure him of his leprosy," she tells her mistress with complete confidence.

Could this be a calculated move on her part in order to win Naaman's favor and her own release? Tantalizingly, we are given no hint. Given her status though, it does seem counter-intuitive that she should be genuinely concerned for Naaman, her captor; and that counter-intuitive behavior points us right back to the Gospel and Jesus' characteristically counter-intuitive conduct: shunning publicity, touching untouchables, loving the unlovable, exposing the hollowness of officialdom, yet silent in his own defense when faced with a death sentence.

Last weekend, the Bishop of Maryland, Eugene Sutton, preached at a beautiful service of rededication offered by the diocese's Visioning Committee: he spoke of Christians as *eccentrics*, those who live out of their center, that center who is Christ. Those who dare to act out of *that* centre may exhibit behavior that is puzzlingly, even bizarrely, counter-intuitive, but the Christian eccentric's behavior mirrors the one who "did not think equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave ... [and humbling himself] became obedient to the point of death."

Poor Naaman, *he* knows only the intuitive behavior of privilege when faced with catastrophe. He corresponds to human nature as Reinhold Niebuhr describes it: “being more than a natural creature [man] is not interested merely in physical survival but in prestige and social approval ... Possessing a darkly unconscious sense of his insignificance in the total scheme of things, he seeks to compensate for his insignificance by pretensions of pride.” [*The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*] Face to face with his own ultimate insignificance in the form of a death sentence, Naaman can muster only the kind of self-serving bluster and ostentatious display that we saw recently when the auto industry’s CEOs flew in to Washington in their corporate jets, begging bowls in hand.

It is difficult to relinquish the symbols of power when you are big shot, difficult to admit to powerlessness when your ambition, and even your very life, collides with reality: leprosy is slow paced in its development, but if unchecked it eventually takes over its victim, lopping off fingers, hands, even whole limbs, as the entire nervous system shuts down. Naaman knows what is in store for him, and he is scared out of his wits. Yet he still protests when Elisha the great prophet does not even bother to come out and meet him, instead prescribing—through an intermediary, yet—such a humiliatingly simple remedy: “Go wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”

Suddenly, a window opens into Naaman’s soul and we are invited to see the struggle within, that struggle with which we are all too familiar, between the intuitive impulse of pride, and the counter-intuitive impulse of humility. After a great deal more bluster and protest and stamping of feet, Naaman is finally humbled and does what he is bidden; washes himself in the Jordan water of baptism, and is healed, in both body and soul.

*O Christ, you came that we might have life, and have it more abundantly, grant us boldness and power in our love, strength in our humility, purity in our zeal, kindness in our laughter, and your peace in our hearts, all for your love’s sake. Amen*