

THE PRODIGAL / Oct. 10, 2010

Sermon: “Leper’s Anonymous”

Sermon by: Fr. Bill Wigmore

The first reading is taken from the book 12 Steps & 12 Traditions written by Bill Wilson:

In our early time, nothing seemed so fragile, so easily breakable as an AA group. Hardly an alcoholic we approached paid any attention; most of those who did join us were flickering candles in a windstorm. Time after time their uncertain flames blew out and couldn't be re-lighted. Our unspoken, constant thought was, “Which one of us may be the next?”

Every AA group had many membership rules. Everybody was scared witless that something or someone would capsize the boat and dump us all back into the drink. (Our list of admission requirements collected from the various AA groups was a mile long.) If all those rules had been in effect everywhere, nobody could have possibly joined AA at all, so great was the sum of our anxiety and fear.

We were resolved to admit nobody to AA but that hypothetical class of people we termed “*pure alcoholics*.” Except for their guzzling, and the unfortunate results thereof, they could have no other complications. ... Yes sir, we'd cater only to pure and respectable alcoholics!

A newcomer appeared at one of these groups, knocked on the door and asked to be let in. He talked frankly with the group's oldest member. He soon proved that he was a desperate case, and that above all he wanted to get well. “*But,*” he asked, “*will you let me join your group? Since I am the victim of another addiction even worse stigmatized than alcoholism, you may not want me among you. Or will you?*”

At first the elders could only look at the objections. “*We deal,*” they said, “*with alcoholics only. Shouldn't we sacrifice this one for the sake of the many?*” So went the discussion while the newcomer's fate hung in the balance.

Then one of the (elders) spoke in a very different voice. “*What we are really afraid of is our reputation. We are much more afraid of what people might say than the trouble this strange alcoholic might bring. As we began talking, five short words have been running through my mind. Something keeps repeating to me, ‘What would the Master do?’* Not another word was said. What more indeed *could* be said?”

The second reading tonight is a modern version of Psalm 107.

*Thank the Lord for his kindness *for his mercy endures forever*

*Let those who were rescued from disaster *acknowledge the mercy of the Lord*

*Some lost their way in the desert *and wandered in the barren wastes*

*They were dying of thirst and hunger *their spirits melted within them*

*So they cried out to the Lord in their trouble *and he rescued them from their distress*

*He led them on a straight path *till they reached an inhabited city*

*Let them thank the Lord for his mercy *for the miracle he has performed*

*For he satisfies the longing soul *and he fills the hungry with good things*

*Thank the Lord for his kindness *for his mercy endures forever*

Gospel of Luke: And on the way to Jerusalem he happened to pass between Samaria and Galilee. As he was coming into this village, he was met by ten lepers, who kept their distance. They shouted, “*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*”

When he saw them, he said, “*Go show yourselves to the priests.*”

And as they departed they happened to be made clean.

Then one of the, realizing that he had been healed, came back. He praised God out loud, threw himself at Jesus' feet, and thanked him. (Incidentally, this man was a Samaritan.)

But Jesus said, "*Ten were cured, were they not? What became of the other nine? Didn't any of them return to praise God beside this foreigner?*"

And he said, "*Get up and be on your way; your trust has made you whole.*"

Sermon by Fr. Bill W.

– Once again, welcome to the service. How's everyone doing tonight?

You know, there's a number of different ways for us to read a gospel story –

- **One is to take it all "literally"** –

Like it's the reporting of an actual incident that the writer's telling us about.

- The story he's telling could have made the morning edition of the Jerusalem Post:
- **"Young Rabbi Heals 10 Lepers – Townspeople Amazed"**
- If you'd-a-been there with a video camera, you could have caught it all on tape!

That's probably the way most people hearing this story read in church today will try to respond. Some will flat out believe every word –

And some will walk away having their doubts.

But there's another way we can read and try to understand a story like this – *and that's to ask:*

- "What does this story have to do with me?"
- "How can I relate to these gospel characters?"
- How can I relate to their feelings, and to their fears – and finally to their faith?"

One of the things that allowed me to get back in the church after walking away for a very long time – was learning that the gospel writers themselves never meant for many of their stories to be read like they were newspaper accounts.

The gospels were never written as "history" –

but they were written from the perspective of each writer's own faith.

Their stories were written down to tell *who Jesus was to them*

and who he was to the community of believers they belonged to and wrote for.

They wanted people to know

what a difference Jesus had made for them in their lives and

what a difference he can make in our own.

And in that sense – their stories are ***truer than true*** –

because they speak to the deepest parts of what it means to be a human being –

a human being whose life has been touched and

changed by knowing God through this man Jesus.

- These gospel stories have stood the test of time – and they can still speak to us today if we know how to read them –
- *Not with our 21st century skeptical minds – but with our hearts.*
- **And human hearts haven't changed very much in all that time.**

- Tonight's gospel story is short –

- and I thought maybe we could read through it again and try to break it down ***line by line*** –

- My hope in doing that is maybe we can bring the story alive for those of us who are alcoholics and addicts and are now reading it *when we're trying to get sober*.
- **Maybe there's still a thing or two we can learn from a leper.**

Luke starts out by writing:

“And on the Way to Jerusalem, he happened to pass between Samaria and Galilee.”

- **Jesus had made up his mind to go to the capitol** – Up to now it's as if he'd been hanging around in Bastrop and preaching out in Creedmoor. Now he was heading straight for Austin. (explain)
- So he'd made a decision and now, Luke says, he's *“on the way.”*
- In the early Church they used to refer to the faith as being:
“The Way”
- Jesus was “on the Way” – and his followers were “on the Way” too?
- And maybe that's not unlike what happens to us in recovery.
- We finally come to a turning point – we make a decision – we start *on the Way* to our own recovery? There's no turning back for him and hopefully not for us either.

Luke makes a point of mentioning that “he passes between Samaria and Galilee.”

Now there was an ancient hatred that existed between the Jewish people in Galilee and the people who lived in Samaria. Jews would usually travel all the way around that area to reach Jerusalem – rarely would they go through it.

- But Luke says Jesus passes right through.
- He's not afraid to go -
- This is strange land – it's dangerous and unknown territory –
- And when we come into recovery I think we enter something pretty similar – **everything changes** – we don't know the landscape – we're not at home – not yet.
- We probably run into our own share of old resentments and hatreds. Samaritans go by many names!

The story continues: *“And as he was coming into this village, he was met by 10 lepers, who kept their distance.”*

First thing we need to know is that the word **leper** we read here, it doesn't translate with quite the same meaning we give it today.

Back then the word was a *catch-all* for anyone with open sores on their skin. *Psoriasis, eczema* – anything that broke open the skin and opened other people to being exposed to *what* was inside.

(I guess most teenagers back then were considered lepers – like I said, some things don't seem to change!)

- *Anyway, if you came into physical contact with someone like that you were automatically contaminated yourself.*
- *And if you had the skin condition* – then it rendered you **unclean** for as long as you had it.
- You weren't allowed to be **in contact with or go anywhere near** the rest of the tribe.

In the Book of Leviticus, the Jewish scriptures state it like this:

- *“The leper shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled.”*
- **(People needed to recognize them when they approached on the road.)**
- *“And he shall cover his upper lip (with his cloak) and cry out: ‘Unclean! Unclean!’*
- *And he shall remain **unclean** as long as he has the condition*
- *He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be **outside the camp.**”*

Maybe as alcoholics and addicts *we all* ought to pause for a second and let that last line really sink in – see if maybe we can't **all identify** with that one.

- **“He shall live *alone* ---- his dwelling shall be *outside the camp.*”**
- This is called the lonely man and woman's illness –
- and all of us have lived our time “outside the camp.” (explain)

Now I've been sober almost 38 years now – and in the first half of my sobriety, I watched as recovering alcoholics & addicts began making some real progress in the eyes of our society.

When I was sober just a year, I was living in Michigan and I heard some guy from Texas come tell us that *the drunks down here* had actually made the government *appoint a special Commission* to try to help all the alcoholics & addicts in his state.

- They wanted the government **treating this thing like an illness** / and the people who had it:
- they wanted them all **treated with dignity and respect!**
- *Back then, Texas seemed to me like the holy city of Jerusalem!*

But over the years I've watched the progress that we alcoholics & addicts had made *slip away*.

- Each year now, they seem to lock *more & more of us up* in prisons.
- **They keep us safely confined: “outside the camp.”**
(*Nobody inside complains.*)
- In California: it's *three strikes with your addiction and you're out!*
- It's a catchy phrase – but the reality is that some drug addicts are doing “**life outside the camp and inside a prison**” for the third offense like: **stealing a bicycle - or one guy: a loaf of bread.**
- Each year, Texas refuses treatment to tens of thousands of us who are begging for it
- And it's created **probation & parole systems that live off of and financially profit from** the suffering of addicts.
- You all know the largest employer in the state of Texas? The Department of Criminal Justice! Prisons are big business in our state.

A few years ago, that Commission the drunks started to help alcoholics & addicts, *it went out of business*. But by the time it died, it was so out of touch with the people it was meant to help that nobody shed a tear at its passing. ***The drunks and the addicts all stayed in hiding.***

Maybe we're a people *too ashamed* to raise our voices or show our faces on the capitol steps – so when the state of Texas needs money, they don't hesitate to *single us out* to take away our food stamps *or single us out* to take away our *government education loans* if we've ***ever even once*** been branded *a filthy, low-life drug addict.*”

- Deep down, we just think of ourselves as **Unclean! Unclean!**
- **I hope we can identify with the addict-leper.**
- **And maybe our own self-hatred is part of the cause.**
- One of the turning points in my own recovery was when a counselor asked me,
- “Bill, what would you do to someone who said to you the things you say about you in your head?”
- **Without a moment's hesitation I said, “I'd kill him!”**
- And then the guy asked me, “***Isn't that what you've been doing?***”

The lepers “keep their distance” from Jesus – but they've heard that this man is a healer and that he's different from the other holy men they've known.

- *Word in the leper colony* was that he was inviting some pretty low-life-people to come and eat at his table –

- **People** who the priests themselves had said were *unclean and unworthy*: **Prostitutes, tax collectors, known sinners.**
- Jesus was saying they're **all welcome** in God's kingdom.
- **But what about lepers? Would he go that far?**
- They call out to him: "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*"

Jesus does have mercy. He has mercy cause the God and Father he knows has mercy.

It's his very nature to have mercy – That's the Good News – and that's the whole point of Luke's story.

- "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed – our Way."
- (It's interesting that when the writers of the Big Book were looking for a name to call it – they almost chose *The Way Out!*)

Jesus says: "*Go show yourselves to the priest.*"

- Go and do what the law asks you to do – follow the directions – go to meetings – read the book – take the steps – go show yourself to the priest.
- Back in those days the priest was like the local health inspector – If you were going to be rendered clean – it was the priest's job to inspect you and let you back into the camp.

Then Luke says: "*as they departed they happened to be made clean.*"

And here we might try to imagine what that cleansing must have been like for each one of those ten lepers. After all those years of being alone – after all the shame – after all the self hatred –

- One of the real joys in my recovery has been hearing 5th steps from a couple of hundred men.
- It all comes pouring out, just like mine came pouring out years ago.
- And at the end – if we've really dumped it all - we feel ... **clean.**

I've told you before what my sponsor said when I was finally done with all my dumping.

He said, "*Bill, welcome to the human race!*"

I'll never forget those words. I hope I never do.

I was in the camp – and I was welcomed home!

(But) "*Then one of them, realizing that he had been healed, came back.*

He praised God out loud, threw himself at Jesus' feet, and thanked him."

Jesus asks: "*What became of the other nine? Didn't any of them return to praise God – Is it only this Samaritan – this foreigner?*"

- We don't know from Luke's story what ever happened to those other nine.
- And sometimes I wonder what happens to all the people who come through here for treatment.
- Maybe one of those lepers went straight home and hugged his wife – He hadn't felt her touch or been with her in years.
- Maybe another one went to work – he needed to make up for all that lost time –
- I see a lot of our alumni go and do that.
- And another, he went out and spread the good news – he was home again.
- That's all OK, Jesus doesn't blame any of them for what they did.
- He simply asks his question: ***Is there only one who's returned?***

And, of course, wouldn't you know the one who did return – the only one who came back and thanked God, he was the very one who was even looked down on by the other nine. He was the Samaritan – an outcast living among the outcasts.

I think Luke's message here is pretty clear.

- **The more of an outcast we've been** – the more we've felt that aloneness – the uncleanness –
- Then the more *grateful* this new life is for us all.

- Maybe the other nine were all OK –
- Maybe many of the men and women who go out of here and never come back – maybe they're OK too. I hope so.
- But this leper who did come back – he now has something special – this leper is in touch with God – praising him and thanking him - He's in touch with the very source of his healing.

Jesus says to him: ***“Get up now and be on your WAY – your trust has made you whole.”***

- The tenth leper isn't just healed – **He's made whole** –
- He's back inside the camp with his family and friends –
- But he's found his place into God's camp too –
- **“Made whole”** - and sent on the Way.

As he goes, I can almost hear Jesus shouting after him.

“Welcome to Lepers Anonymous, my friend, welcome home.”

Amen.