

Epiphany 4

I take as my text today from the Gospel of Matthew:

And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him....

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

When we read today's Gospel passage from St. Matthew, there is something that stands out, not only stands out but is very remarkable; it's not just the healing of the leper or the healing of the centurion's servant; rather, it's something quite simple, something we wouldn't even think about today — Jesus reached out his hand and touched the leper.

What is so extraordinary about that simple action?

In today's world, touching another person hasn't a consideration, that is until the pandemic when social distancing became more the norm just as in ancient times. But, still, today, people do touch people. Thus, the question, what is so extraordinary about reaching out and touching someone?

Let's put this in a better perspective and look more closely at today's Gospel passage.

As Jesus came down from the mountain, accompanied by a large throng of followers, he was approached by a leper who pleaded with our Lord to make him clean.

Now, a leper approaching another Jew was quite unheard of in that time, even that a leper would approach anyone was quite unheard of, and not just in ancient time or medieval time but it was true until perhaps a few decades or so ago.

What was it about leprosy that caused so much fear?

From well before the time of Jesus, even up until recent times, a leper was little more than the living dead. He was ostracized, cast out of society, abandoned by family and friends, and forbidden to come near anyone. He was condemned to a living death as punishment for his sins.

Punishment of his sins? That's right — for punishment of his sins — that's what the Jews thought in that time. The disease was punishment for sin. Indeed, disease of any kind was thought to be punishment for sins, especially those resulting in disabilities.

Until recent decades, leprosy was a very misunderstood disease, a horrible disease that ended in a painful death. The body would be covered with lesions or sores. The person would become disfigured. In early times, it was thought that limbs would fall off which though, as we know today, was because of injuries resulting from lack of feeling.

Thus, in ancient time, it appeared as if the person died inch by inch and, for some, the disease could last as long as 20 to 30 years.

That it is contagious is without doubt but as we know today it is spread primarily through nasal droplets, and, importantly, it is only in recent decades that it has become treatable with antibiotics.

Now, in ancient times, lepers were treated as if they were in effect dead men and were required to cover their mouths and cry out as they went about, *unclean, unclean*. Rabbis were known to throw stones at them if they approached. Coming into contact with a leper was second only in defilement to coming into contact with a dead body.

During the Middle Ages, if a person contracted leprosy, he was brought into the church where the priest donned a stole and read the burial service over him. As far as everyone was concerned, the person was already dead.

It wasn't just the outward appearance of the disease. Leprosy was thought to be so contagious, even to the point that if a person got too close, the disease would be transmitted just by proximity; even the shadow of a leper was thought to have dire effects.

With this as the background, we have the scene set with Jesus being approached by the leper. Rather than turn away, even run away, Jesus allowed the man to approach, come close to him.

And then, Jesus did something extraordinary. He reached out his hand and touched the leper.

Imagine the gasp that must have come from the crowd of followers. Even his disciples must have been taken aback by this reckless action.

And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him....

Going against convention; risking everything; he touched the leper. In this act, he was bringing change into the world.

Think about it — isn't that why Jesus came into the world? to bring change, a change of heart and a new way of life; to bring us into a new relationship with God, to redeem us from sin and to give us the hope of eternal life in his Heavenly Kingdom?

He did this first by reaching out and touching people: touching them physically and spiritually.

The Gospel passage from Matthew today gives a perfect example: Jesus reaching out and touching a leper; literally touching him. Unheard of in Biblical times: one simply did not touch an unclean person. The story of the *Good Samaritan* also emphasizes this point. And the story, we also heard today of the centurion, a Gentile, further illustrates the point.

What about today? Is there not still a reluctance to reach out and touch people? Not just people with possible contagious diseases, as when the pandemic caused us to shy away from crowds, even from those close to us, becoming fearful of dying, fixated on the fear of dying, a paralyzing fear, lives changed by this fear and barriers erected.

Without a doubt, we human beings have set up all kinds of barriers: social and economic barriers, educational barriers, ethnic barriers, racial barriers, gender barriers, and religious barriers; and I'm sure there are more barriers, even sub-categories of barriers, more than we can reasonably count.

But for Jesus, there were no such barriers.

Now, some may think that because Jesus was divine, he could touch whoever he pleased, and he would not catch their disease. Perhaps. Remember, Jesus was both human and Divine. By being human, he was subject to our own human frailties; he was not immune to hardship and possibly disease.

But that is not the real point of what he did in touching the lepers, the poor, the infirm, the dead. What Jesus did was to break down barriers and he did this by demonstrating that love was the focal point of God's relationship with humankind and that it should be the focal point of humankind's relationship with one another, and with God.

The risk Jesus took in this simple act of touching someone was more than physical; he was taking on the *system*. By the simple act — touching someone considered unclean — Jesus presented himself as a revolutionary, going against centuries of tradition and confronting Jewish Law.

As he set about changing the world for all time, Jesus also demonstrated his complete authority over nature: he commanded the wind and sea to be calm; he changed water into wine; and he healed the sick. His authority extended even over life and death, raising the dead and finally overcoming death himself.

Our Lord continues to reach out to us and touch us. In his **Body and Blood** that we receive at the Altar, he touches us and feeds us with his very **Life**.

Through the **Sacraments** of the **Church**, Jesus touches us: when we are baptized; when we are confirmed; when we are anointed with Holy Oils or sprinkled with Holy Water; in life and in death, Jesus touches us.

What more could we do in response to that touch than to touch others as well? Touch their lives; make a difference; show the world what revolutionaries we Anglicans are.

There are no barriers in Jesus Christ; there is only love, hope, and life. Likewise, with us, there should be no barriers as we strive to emulate the source of our hope, the object of our love, and the promise of life everlasting.