

“The Living Temple”
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Think for a minute of a time when you felt left out of a group, felt like you did not belong, felt like you were not good enough. I have moved around a fair bit in my life and so have had experiences of feeling left out many times. When I was going into middle school as a sixth grader, my family moved from Phoenix, AZ, where I had lived from the time I was a baby, to Lake Charles, LA. In addition to the feeling the culture shock from moving from the Southwest/West Coast to the South, I also went from attending a little Christian school that was part of the campus of the non-denominational church where my father was a pastor to attending a large public middle school rife with racial and class tensions. I felt like a fish out of water as I rode the bus to school, as I walked the loud and crowded halls, as I watched fights break out on school grounds multiple times a week. I still remember sitting by myself for weeks to a month in the cafeteria at lunch with no one speaking to me, feeling invisible, all the while I stared at all the kids around me, longing for just one of them to engage me in conversation, feeling too scared and nervous to initiate myself, listening to their southern accents and wondering, with curiosity, why in the world they all seemed to fill their side dishes on their cafeteria trays with a big pile of an unidentified slimy green food, which I later came to discover was pickled okra.

I'm sure we can all feel some level of empathy with the man with leprosy, who, in Jesus' day, experienced an incredible degree of social stigma. But at the same time, in that day and age, leprosy was not simply a “social” disease, but also a disease that imposed upon its victims a kind of social “exile,” from all sources of personal, social, and religious identity. Individuals labeled as lepers could be folks with a whole variety of exfoliative skin conditions such as eczema, psoriasis, vitiligo, and boils. Any and all of them were treated as though they were socially dead. To touch a so-called leper would mean you were as defiled as if you had touched a corpse.

So, I imagine not many, if any, of us have gone through something so dramatic as to be so completely socially exiled in our lives. We may think of the way many folks in the gay community were treated at the height of the AIDS crisis. We can also acknowledge that some of the racial history in our country, particularly during Jim Crow, is that many white folks operated out of explicit racist fears and behaviors, treating African Americans as if they were socially dead, working to avoid so-called contamination that would presumably come from having had physical contact with them.

Our text for today is actually the first healing story in the entire Gospel of Matthew. As such, it plays a prominent role in announcing to all those who read or hear Matthew's account of the good news of Jesus Christ that Jesus is the one who is willing to confront and transcend social boundaries of various kinds, especially boundaries that exclude individuals from participating in the community of God's holy people.

Jesus has the power to grant new life to one who is socially dead. Matthew's rendering of this story, which is also told in Mark, is done in such a way to highlight the interaction of Jesus with this unnamed leper. Indeed, if we look closely, we see a fourfold literary structure to their interaction—or four key movements in this dramatic scene.

First: The man approaches Jesus.

Second: The man bows down before Jesus (in other words, he takes up the posture of worship)

Third: After addressing Jesus as Lord, he petitions Jesus

Fourth: Jesus grants his petition.

What is fascinating in this sequence of words and actions is that it is the same basic procedure for those going to worship at a cultic center for healing. What does this mean? Well, it tells us that Jesus functioned for this man as a living, healing temple. In other words, Jesus the healer, became the very living embodiment of a cultic center of healing. Jesus, the healer of every ill, is the living temple for cleansing. And Jesus is not simply able to heal, he is willing to do it. In other words, as the Lord of heaven and earth, Jesus fully embodies the will of God, which is to heal all those who call for help.

But let us think for a moment about the notion of healing and wholeness. Oftentimes we equate these words with the idea of “getting back to” some standard of “normal.” We think healing has only happened if we get back to some prior state of being or measure up to a certain standard for health and beauty. Let's be careful in our thinking. We are modern day people, but we are reading ancient words in this scriptural healing story. So, we need to be careful not to import our concepts of health and healing into the text. Instead, let us consider that Jesus' ministry of healing was an extension of his solidarity with human suffering, especially the suffering of those who have been “abandoned” by society. The evidence of healing in and on the bodies of those touched by Jesus can be seen in the way that God has created for them new life out of hopelessness—in the way that their stories now represent new chapters in the rewritten narrative of human suffering.

In today's healing story, we see this at play precisely in the way that Jesus does not leave the man's healing with him alone. Instead, it is urgent that the man now approach the temple in Jerusalem for confirmation of cleansing. Why? Because God is interested in wholistic healing. Jesus may have cured the man's physical ailment with his skin, but given the very great and pervasive cultural stigma associated with his particular disease, only a temple priest would be able to ensure the man's reincorporation into society and community. Not only that, Jesus gives this man a commission as he goes to the temple. He is to give testimony while he's there—not only about having been made whole and ready to re-enter society, but also about the one who has made him whole. By this, Jesus has made him one of the disciples as he now bears the effects of Jesus' healing power on his own body.

This man has gone from socially exiled and dead to physically healed, and reintegrated into the community that, for so long, feared and shunned him. It is truly a remarkable gospel

story. But can you imagine why this man would want to go back to the temple? Yes, Jesus commands him urgently to go there. But what was the motivation for this man to obey Jesus? Here's the thing: the worshiping community, despite its shortcomings, must have offered something to this child of God that he could not find somewhere else. What kind of hope and healing do we come seeking when we come to our faith community? What do we offer that cannot be found anywhere else?

I would invite you to think about what our church offers to those in pain, those seeking healing and touch: how are we reaching out to people in pain or to those in need of an accepting, inclusive community? Are we acknowledging their suffering and inclusion in worship, ministry, and fellowship? In what ways are we stigmatizing certain kinds of pain? How are we promoting physical health, wholeness, and healing? Jesus' touch of the leper was an outrageous act. By doing it, he signaled that these people were not outside of the kin-dom of God, nor ought they be outside of the love of the community itself. They are family, worthy of touch and inclusion.

Let's also consider how our community might be excluding others, by the boundaries we create, whether explicit, or maybe especially implicit and unnamed. The leper was considered unclean. It does make sense that a community would fear a person with a skin disease. What if it was contagious? Communities create boundaries for good reasons, for self-preservation and to create a strong sense of identity and purpose. The problem is when our boundaries go unchecked and unquestioned—when we are keeping more people out than are coming in. And let us not fall into the trap of many churches who believe that by saying “we are a welcoming community,” they therefore are such, when no outsiders have been asked what they think and the community reflects a monocultural group of people.

At the outset of the healing stories in Matthew, we see highlighted here that Jesus crosses social boundaries in every way imaginable. Can we allow Jesus to teach us, by the work of the Spirit, that perhaps some of the boundaries we thought were helping us might actually be hurting us and hurting others. Look at our church community and ask yourself: who is missing? How are our community standards and norm including or excluding people who long to belong? What might need to look or be different about how we function as a community in order to include more people? Who might we engage in conversation, outside of our own members, to get an accurate read on this?

The truth we have all come to know, in one way or another, in our lives is that we are all treasured by God. We are beautiful. We belong. How can we help more people feel this deeply? May God show us the way. Amen.