

Proper 23, Year C
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A friend of mine is a regular volunteer at the regional hospital near her home. Every week, she goes to the neonatal nursery and holds babies. It's not complicated or difficult; it's very straightforward; she just goes to the neonatal nursery once a week, cuddles newborn babies in her arms one by one and rocks with them, while she sings to them or tells them how beautiful they are and what a gift they are to the world.

The ten people we meet in the Gospel lesson this evening are required, by law, to have no contact with other human beings. They have a disfiguring skin disease that requires them, according to Levitical law, to keep their distance from others and to call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" whenever someone passes by, so that everyone will be duly warned: here is an outcast, here is a person who is unclean, here is an untouchable.

A simple but profound truth about us is that we all need loving human contact. It's just the way God made us. From the time we are born, this is true. We need to be held and rocked as infants; babies that experience such human touch are much more likely to be healthy than those who are left alone in an incubator or bassinette.

And as we grow older, this basic human need doesn't go away. In fact, this need for loving human contact is often intensified as we grow older. *Everyone* knows that soft, smooth-skinned *babies* are cute and loveable. But most of us, as we grow older, become less and less convinced that we are very attractive to others. Often, as we age, we start to believe that our wrinkled and worn bodies are off-putting to others. But our need for loving touch never goes away, and how often it happens to me as I walk the halls of a nursing home that an elderly person strapped to her wheelchair, a perfect stranger who has never seen me before, reaches out to me with all the strength she has in her, hoping I will touch her. The need never goes away; it's just the way God made us.

The ten lepers who encounter Jesus have a visible disease of the skin that requires them to keep their distance from others. We, on the other hand, often seem to develop an invisible disease of the soul that keeps us at a distance from each other. We might feel ugly and convinced that others have little use for us. Or, we might be going through a divorce or have a chronic ailment, or we might be depressed or grieving, ... for any number of reasons, we might sometimes feel as if we are a burden to others – they don't want to be around me like this – so we keep our distance.

But when we keep our distance from each other, we can begin to feel a distance from God, as well. And here we are approaching the cornerstone of Christianity – the most profound truth about God and the deepest need of all human beings. Simply stated, Christianity is about love with skin on it. Christians believe that the Word of God written in the Law of Moses is important, but it isn't enough. We believe that the Word of God spoken through the prophets is important, but it isn't enough. In the end, the Word of God had to become flesh in Jesus, to touch us. And now, Jesus told his disciples, the love

of God must become flesh in us. Our role is to pass on to each other what we have received from God.

Nine of the ten lepers realized that they were cured of a skin disease. But one of them saw that something deeper had happened, something beneath the skin. This one knew he was loved, and he returned to thank Jesus. Nine were cured. One was healed. Nine followed Levitical law and hurried on to present themselves to the priest. No doubt, after that miraculous day, those nine would always be vigilant about observing institutional requirements. After all, they had done what the law required, and their skin disease had been cured. But one, a Samaritan, saw beneath the skin – even though all he had known for so long was that he was unclean and untouchable, he was healed when he met Jesus and realized he was loved.

[And one might well wonder, when Jesus told his well-known parable of the Good Samaritan, did he perhaps have this one Samaritan in mind? Could it be that Jesus was thinking of the other nine when he spoke of how others passed by the needy victim, because they had commitments and institutional obligations to meet? And was it the healed Samaritan leper from this evening's story who stopped and gave to the wounded man what he himself had received?]

Although they are often related, and one can lead to the other, there might well be a difference at times between one who has been cured and one who has been healed. One is restored physically, and the other is made whole spiritually. Surely we've all seen very sick and even dying people who radiate a healing spirit. This healing comes from knowing that we are deeply loved, and this healing is something God has empowered us to offer to each other. And when we do so, we are in touch with God's most profound truth and our deepest need.