

Healing the Leper, Richard's Story

Sometimes it's difficult for us to really get a sense of what is going on in Biblical stories. Because, of course, we hear through the context of our own time, of our own social locations. And sometimes we miss things.

A story about healing a leper, is not really intended to be a medical story. A story about healing a leper is a social story. The leper represents the outcast. The life of a leper has been described as that of a "dead man walking. He is "living as 'a corpse haunting the edges of the community he could no longer enter.'"¹

"He was considered unclean because his physical imperfection violated the Holiness Code of his people, found in the Book of Leviticus. People were created in a clearly defined manner. If they were born with a defect, became visibly diseased, or their body didn't function correctly, then they were unclean." In other words, this was a situation for the priests, not the doctors."²

We don't have the same holiness codes, but we do have outcasts, people who live on the margins of our society. They are most often poor, often homeless, sometimes addicted or mentally ill. They are modern-day lepers, for whom healing is also social/spiritual. I want to share with you one person's story. Think of this as a contemporary 'healing of a leper' story. Listen for the fulcrum moment.

As I tell you this story, imagine that I am a 35 year old aboriginal man. I am one of the youngest of 12 children. I was raised in foster care, not only removed from my family and my culture, but also from my twin. My name is Richard. This is my story.

It is difficult to acknowledge what life is like when you have to live on \$500 a month.
The things you think, the plans you make.

It's hard to relay these concepts to anyone, whether they're in the same boat as you or not.

It is an isolated place, a nowhere in the middle of everything.

A loneliness among the multitude of the impoverished.

After many years of exposure to this, the "worldly passions" are the only recognizable bond.

I'm not talking about the real world passions that haunt those who have a wallet worth looting

I'm talking about the simple daily pleasures, the nickels and dimes of the impoverished community, the twenty cent tailor-made cigarette, or the two dollar joint, the free meal that only costs a forty five minute walk, or the food bank

¹(Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year B*, as quoted by Kathryn Matthews Huey on-line www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/february-12-2012-sixth-sunday.html)

² Kathryn Matthews Huey, www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/february-12-2012-sixth-sunday.html

handout received by qualifying for the application process and standing in a line at the right time.

These are the simple amusements of those who are "down and out", those who are well beyond escaping the trap
These things, these passions that amuse are found on what I call "The Circuit", a closed path with no exit.

It is difficult to share with others how I wake up and am excited, because there's a breakfast today,
or I can walk from Sixth Avenue to Columbia Street twice a day to eat lunch and dinner,
or the pride of purchasing my own box of cigarettes.
Over the years I learned to share, very slowly, through slitted eyes my simple pleasures in a simple life. I know when to not say anything when I talk to others.

I suppose this was the secretive nature that made me invisible.
I could go anywhere, any time of day or night, and yet by the next day it was as though I was never there at all.
When I was walking down the street, people would not see me, or would not look at me when we passed,
people would even have knocked me off the sidewalk if I hadn't jumped out of the way first.
That's what alerted me to my disposability.
I had become the "expendable Extra" found in tv shows, the character whose first appearance is also their death scene.

Moving to New Westminster, I began a new life. I wanted to be useful, to shed my disposability.
I did the things I could do. I shared my resources, my smokes, my pot, my money when I had it. I held doors for old ladies, and made sure people on crosswalks had a fair chance against the hurried drivers who took little notice of pedestrians. I smiled at people when I saw them on the street, said hi to those who spoke. I talked with people at checkouts to help them know they were not part of the cash machine, but were still human beings.
Yet, still, by the end of the day, I was still the expendable extra, the one nobody would notice was missing should I somehow vanish from the face of the city. I was trapped on the circuit, unable to see any off-ramp, running the checkpoints of the week. Sunday Dinner at Foursquare church, Dinners on weekdays at the mission, Food bank handouts for those who qualify on Tuesday or Wednesday morning, Lunch at Queens Church on Wednesday, Early breakfast at Holy Trinity and Lunch at St. Barnabas on Thursday, Breakfast at the Salvation Army Church on Friday, and nothing anywhere on National Holidays.
I can say it wasn't death, but it sure didn't bring life either. Yet at the time, I thought, "This is the life." I was happy, content, No responsibility to anyone, but my

landlord, and my welfare worker. I was an anonymous life, doing what I could to stay alive and to leave lives a little better than how I found them. But again, it did not bring life.

It was one day, I heard it "Surviving is not enough." It was a message on a tv show or movie I'd seen, and it made me wake up from my sedated life of malnutrition, drugs, cigarettes and alcohol; it made me remember what I was in New Westminster for.

Let me take you back so you can see why that statement is so important. It struck a chord in me that brought me back to the day I struggled to let go of life, to exit this world. It was the day I recognized my independence from everyone I ever knew. Everyone I had ever had any relation to had let me go, sent me away and now I was on my own, an orphan known by no one.

At this point I could do anything I pleased, no objections from anyone, and after a long thought, I decided I wanted out of the world. It was fake. Things start and it feels like life, but then they stop, and they vanish as if they never existed in the first place.

Such was my life. I was the son of many people, the big brother to many children, the honest friend to many people, the quiet promising student who had a lot of potential to many teachers, and the ward of the court to many social workers. But now, this day, I am nothing to anyone, and having no obligations, I want out [of the world. But in the end I don't.]

In solitude I prayed, "where shall I go my Lord?" and I was directed toward Columbia Street.

I found the Union Gospel Mission. It was comfortable and though the people seemed desperate, they were welcoming and inviting.

I saw I could get a coffee at the window so I helped myself and sat at the table. I finished less than half a cup when others close by struck up a conversation. It was simple, straight forward and personal.

They, and everyone there, I found, were not predators seeking to get the best of you and leave you for dead, like the news portrayed. They were more like the victims of such.

Immediately I have such compassion for them, hearing the places they came from, the people they used to be. Most used to have families, spouses, children, pets, a car in the driveway, some even owned their own house.

And now, I meet them, and they rent hotel rooms with no kitchens, and dig through free clothes-bins for a wardrobe. The people they befriend here are their family now, and their past is only a story shared over a coffee day after day.

I am still stuck in a rut. Like a circle track of charity, I have to eat at these places and I can't get ahead. If I buy food, I can't buy smokes or pot, plus I won't see the others at the mission, or elsewhere on the circuit.

[But] I wanted out of the circuit.

This one day, two people came in to the Mission where I ate. I came in late, so I was in the overflow seats behind the presentation area at the front. It was two women, with a political message. ~~Kimiko and another woman.~~

They were talking about the elections coming up for City Councillors, the posters were all over the city. ~~Kimiko~~ One was talking about how the System works, how our votes were our voice, how we were important, and we could do anything we put our minds to. That our vote was the way we participated in the community, in the city, and in the country.

I, at that moment realized there are others out there who I can communicate with, who wanted me to communicate with them.

This was a step in a journey to a different life. Being invited to participate in society, told your ideas and thoughts are valuable, and we want to hear from you. I wanted to change my life; be a real person, not a shadow to be walked through on the street.

Visiting the food bank one day, I opened a brochure for education at Vancouver College and saw that computer Networking is a career, and I could achieve a diploma in a year. I decided to get a student loan and go to school.

I attended CDI in Metrotown for the year of 2007, achieving a "Network Administration" diploma. For a year I had no time to do anything other than study, bathe, eat and sleep. I am \$13,000 in debt.

I got a job working as a Technician at ECL Computing where we build networks for businesses. The perfect job. My boss is friendly, humble, kind and generous. Plus he is a faithful Christian.

I dress differently, people look at me differently. I am me still, but my world and boundaries are changed. I have taken the off ramp from the circuit.

This is a story of healing. Thanks be to God. Amen.