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The Elephant Man  
Luke 5:12-15

Most of us, in our life journey, have few times when we have to decide how we will relate to a person who is badly disfigured. Most of us have learned to look beyond the outward appearance of a person and look within one's heart. It is easier when we know some one personally.

In preparing this sermon, I was amazed at how many times the word "unclean" is found in the Bible. I am told that in the time of Jesus and probably other times lepers were expected to shout those words whenever they were close to other people. "Unclean!" "Unclean!"

And yet there are some interesting counter points in the scriptures.

In the scripture lesson I have chosen for this morning (Luke 5:12-15), Jesus encountered a man covered with leprosy. The leper said to Jesus, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." Then Jesus stretch out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be made clean." Jesus touched him.

The writer of the book of Acts puts these words on the lips of Peter: (Acts 10:18) "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."

When I was the pastor in Juneau, Alaska, a member of my congregation was badly disfigured and many visitors to our church would admit that they found themselves staring at a member of our adult choir.

When she was born, she was born with only one hand. Her second arm just had a stub on the end. For whatever reason, her birth mother placed her in a garbage can and set the contents on fire. Claudette was very badly burned, especially on her face. She was rescued and went through a vast number of surgeries. When we knew her, she was a leader in the Girl Scout movement, the secretary for the head of the Department of Correction, being able to take shorthand and then type with one hand more quickly than most could handle with two hands. And, as I've said, she sang in the church choir.

As we learned her story, she eventually was able to both meet and forgive her birth mother. Her level of spirituality put most of us to shame. And in spite of her scars, those who came to know her saw beauty that strangers could not see.

The same was true for The Elephant Man. A powerful movie was produced in the 1980's about an actual person named Joseph Cary Merrick. In the drama he was referred to as John Merrick. There is also a play by the same name. Some of their information came from a book by Ashley Montagu. It is a moving account of the plight of one John Merrick, a 19<sup>th</sup> century man who was horribly disfigured. Yet he emerged from his disorder with his courage and dignity intact.

“The Elephant Man”, a film about Merrick’s short, painful life as a circus freak in the 1880’s, is a stirring epitaph to his memory. In its respectful, unexploitative retelling, the story aspires to be a lesson in compassion for the viewer... Merrick, played by John Hurt, was a prisoner of his own flesh. Born with this rare disease, his head grew to three times normal size; only his left hand remained normal after his body grew to twisted adulthood, covered with thick mounds of overgrown skin. His face was truly monstrous, and he could talk and eat only with difficulty.

X-ray studies and three-dimensional computed tomography scans of the skeletal remains back a theory that he suffered from an extremely rare disorder called Proteus syndrome. This non-inherited disorder, not even identified until 1979, is triggered by proliferating cells that cause abnormal bone growth in the skull and in some body tissues. At this time there are approximately 120 documented cases worldwide.

For years, it was assumed that Merrick suffered from neurofibromatosis, which is still commonly called Elephant Man disease. People with mild forms of this genetic disorder, which occurs in about one of 4000 births, sometimes have brownish spots on their faces or bodies – which Merrick did not have. He did have, however, the obvious disfigurement caused by nervous system tumors seen in people with the severe form of the disease.

Montagu says that the plays and movies produced from his book missed the main point of Merrick’s struggle. “The whole point of that story is the power of love that Merrick received from his mother during his first 12 years. It gave him the strength to resist all the sling and arrows of his misfortune, and to be the kind of generous, childlike creature that he remained all of his life.” (Anchorage Daily News, April 16, 1982)

As shown in the film, at one point Mr. Merrick was taken from a safe haven to be put on display as a freak in an European sideshow. He became ill from mistreatment and friends helped him to escape and return to England. On his arrival at the Liverpool Street Station, in London, an ugly crowd gathered to taunt him and to gawk at him. Merrick, trapped and panic stricken in the corner of an underground men’s room, cries out: “I AM NOT AN ELEPHANT! I AM NOT AN ANIMAL! I AM A HUMAN BEING! I...AM..A MAN!” When he gets back to a hospital, Frederic Treves, a surgeon, who rescued him from this nightmarish experience...showed him kindness and compassion...helped others to reach out and touch his life.

Earlier in the movie, upon one of his first contacts with a woman who did not shrink from seeing his distorted features, he told Dr. Treves afterwards that “this was the first woman who had ever smiled at him”..Can you imagine the pain he carried?

(Taken from “The Man Inside the Monster” an epitaph by Ed Spivey, Jr. in “Sojourners”, January, 1981.)

John Merrick was a beautiful man. And more importantly, after nearly a lifetime of ostracism and humiliation, he died knowing he was loved.

It is a powerful story, though I must add, for honesty's sake, that the historical record is not as dramatic as the stage and film version.

Barbara and I visited a leprosy community in Liberia in 1971. Each person there was unable to return to the villages from which they had come because they were unwelcome there due to their disfigurement.

Talking about leprosy may be difficult for many of us, for it is outside of our experience. Some estimates indicate that worldwide there are some 15 million cases. The figure may in fact be considerably higher because of inadequate reporting systems, and because many lepers, out of fear of prejudices attached to the illness, never seek medical help, even when it exists. Indeed, it has been said that only one person in five receives treatment of any kind. (data from "The Scourge of Leprosy" by George M. Anderson, "America", March 14, 1981.)

Since we don't have lepers in our own community, it seems important for us to reflect on who we treat as "lepers" in our own society. Who are the outcasts, the undesired .. In the old days, lepers had to cry out a warning: "Unclean! Unclean!" And Jesus not only touched them, he loved them and he healed them.

One wonders who we are called to love and heal and help today?

A young, rather innocent girl from a small country town went to seek work in a large city. She was given a massive form to fill out: Name, address, family history, etc. When she came to the question, "In case of emergency, whom should we notify?" She called the personnel manager over and said, "I don't understand." The manager said, "Well, you know, if some accident befell you on the job, or some emergency arose, whom should we call?" She said, "Why, the nearest human being, of course." If only it were that simple.

Years ago, Jesus was asked by a lawyer: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan". A universal story of the so-called outsider or enemy offering compassion to one of the residents of Palestine. It is hard to forget the definition of "Who is my neighbor?" "Why, the nearest human being, of course". The next person you meet.

And it doesn't matter if that person is a citizen or a non-citizen. It doesn't matter if that person is a resident or a non-resident. It doesn't matter the racial background of that person. And it doesn't matter the sexual orientation of that person. A neighbor is the next person you meet.

Most of us are not tested by dramatic examples. We are just confronted by people, just like ourselves, who are some times difficult to relate to. People who, just like ourselves, are less than perfect. Persons who may be having a bad day or a bad week or a bad life. How we relate to such persons may make the difference between sickness and health for them and for us.

When we are able to reach out and touch some one else's life, we can be instruments of God's healing.

The leper said to Jesus, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." Then Jesus stretch out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be made clean." Jesus touched him.

Who has touched us in our journey? Who will we touch in our lives? May God give us the strength to give and to receive. To touch and be touched.

It is beautiful when we can be instruments of God's grace in today's world.