

2 Kings 2:5-15; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45
Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany

Spiritual Cooties

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Grace Epiphany Church
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Good morning! Thank you for braving the snow and ice to be here this morning. It's a pleasure and an honor to preach at Grace Epiphany Church today. I've known Fr. Thomas for many years. We first met over a decade ago when he was a seminarian at the Episcopal Divinity School. At that time, I was a newly-ordained minister who was guest preaching at EDS. I am now on the faculty of EDS, where I teach early church history and contemporary theology. Anyway, I've heard a lot about this congregation over the years – all good things, I assure you! – and so it's a blessing to be here with you today.

I want to talk to you this morning about a very sophisticated theological concept called . . . the cooties. Yes, the cooties. I bet you didn't know this was part of the seminary curriculum, right? When I was in elementary school, I remember that we boys were never supposed to get too close to the girls. Why? Because we would get this thing called the cooties. Cooties weren't a physical illness, of course, but they might as well have been. They were infectious and marked you as an outsider or an outcast if you had them. You were rejected by your peers if you dared to cross that gender boundary line.

This may surprise you, but I, for one, was never very butch growing up. And, frankly, I liked playing jump rope, hopscotch, and four square with the girls in my elementary school class. I was never very good at boys' sports, and I hated kickball and dodgeball. Not much has changed. I wouldn't have watched any part of last weekend's Super Bowl except for the fact that Madonna did the halftime show. And so I played jump rope, hopscotch, and four square with the girls. But that made me an outsider with the boys. I had the cooties.

We may think that, as adults, we've outgrown the cooties epidemic. But I would argue that the concept of cooties remains deep within our psyches. Whether or not we're conscious of it, we've been taught from an early age that there is something dangerous and infectious about people who dare to cross certain socially-constructed boundary lines, such as gender. And, in fact, I think religious institutions are particularly good at enforcing the boundaries of clean and unclean, of insider and outsider – a phenomenon that I call the “spiritual cooties.”

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On one level, today's gospel reading is about leprosy, a physical illness, and how Jesus miraculously heals a person with this illness and allows him to return to society. But on another level, the story is about spiritual cooties and the social construction of the "other." Don't get too close to the leper or else you, too, will get infected. Don't cross that line between clean and unclean, insider and outsider, or else you, too, will become unclean. And what's most striking about today's gospel is that *Jesus* is the one who dares to cross that line.

Most biblical scholars agree that the leprosy mentioned in the Bible isn't the same condition that we call Hansen's disease today. Biblical leprosy was actually about a number of skin conditions in which the flesh becomes discolored and turned white. People with this skin condition were seen by the ancient Israelites as the living dead – zombies if you will – because they were alive and yet had skin that seemed to be dead. They somehow crossed the boundary between life and death, and because of that were seen as dangerous. The ancient Israelites were obsessed with skin diseases – two entire chapters of the Book of Leviticus are devoted to this topic. And, believe it or not, even buildings and fabrics could be infected with leprosy, say as a result of mildew. So it wasn't just a question of illness.

People who had biblical leprosy were the outcasts of ancient Israelite society. Not just physically, but also spiritually. They were not allowed to be part of the religious life of the community and had to be excluded out of the fear of contaminating the others. In fact, lepers could not live under the same roof as "clean" people. They had to keep at least four cubits, or six feet, away from "clean" people at all times. Can you imagine always being at a distance of six feet from everyone in your community? And, when "clean" people approached them, they had to shout "unclean, unclean" as a warning. And, if lepers were ever cured of the condition, they had to go to the religious leaders – the priests – who were required to inspect them and conduct an elaborate cleaning ritual involving the sprinkling of water and the blood of a sacrificed bird before they could reenter society.

Given all this, what Jesus does in today's gospel reading is absolutely remarkable. Jesus does not run away when the leper approaches and asks for healing. In fact, not only does Jesus not run away, but he physically reaches out and touches the leper. Jesus stretches out his hand and chooses to make the leper clean. Jesus consciously breaks the social, cultural, and religious rules of his day that separate the clean from the unclean. In fact, by touching the leper, Jesus himself becomes "tainted" – that is, Jesus himself is now unclean – which is something that no respectable religious leader of his time would ever have done.

What's equally remarkable is the fact that the leper dares to ask Jesus, the Son of God, for healing. He doesn't shy away, thinking that he isn't good enough to approach God for what he needs, or settles for being a second-class citizen. He disregards the six feet rule. He doesn't shout "unclean, unclean." He simply kneels and begs for healing. Nothing can separate him from the love of God. (Contrast the leper's faith with the

mighty warrior Naaman in today's first reading who initially refuses to listen to the prophet Elisha and wash himself in the river Jordan seven times.)

Furthermore, not only does the leper ask Jesus for healing, but he also forces Jesus to make a choice to touch him and to cleanse him. He says, "If you choose, you can make me clean." And Jesus chooses to do so. Jesus responds, "I do choose. Be made clean!"

At the end of this remarkable encounter, Jesus and the leper changes positions. The leper is made clean and returns to the community. He proclaims the good news openly even though Jesus tells him not to. In fact, it seems from the text of the gospel that the leper bypasses the normal route of getting a clean certificate of health from the priests. Jesus, on the other hand, either perhaps because of his popularity – or perhaps because he has been tainted by touching the leper – becomes the outsider. The gospel tells us that Jesus could no longer go into a town "openly" and instead had to stay in the countryside.

So who are the lepers for our church today? Who are those with spiritual cooties? Who are the lepers in your own life – those who you see as outsiders or unclean? Transgender folks? Undocumented immigrants? Those for whom English is a second language? Homeless people? People with drug addictions? People with physical and mental disabilities? That person who you just can't stand dealing with at church? Republicans? Democrats? Independents? The list goes on and on.

For me, today's gospel is a stark reminder that *there are no outsiders* for those of us who seek to follow Christ Jesus in our lives. Like Jesus, we are called to challenge those boundaries that separate clean from unclean, respectable from unrespectable, and safe from dangerous. And, yes, even those who have spiritual cooties from those who don't. Do we simply avoid our modern-day lepers out of the fear that we will somehow be infected? Or will we stop, reach out, and touch them, regardless of the consequences to us?

Edmund Browning, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church from 1985 to 1997, said famously that in this church, "there are no outcasts." The Episcopal Church, as a denomination, has overcome many barriers that excluded the "other" in the two hundred plus years that it has been in existence, including race, gender, and sexuality. And yet many outsiders still remain, waiting to be welcomed into the church. Will you choose to make them clean?

+Amen.