

**Sermon Preached by Mr. Geoffrey Royce
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
CandleMass, Proper 23, Year C
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It seems to me that it is getting more and more difficult to use the word “civilized” or “rational”. I am honestly more inclined to use the word “madness”. These words are often opposed to each other and therefore are part of each other’s definition.

Opposites like this seem to require one another. Order distinguishes itself from disorder. Preferences from non-preferences. This mechanism works in many ways in our world. We sort and separate what is good from what is not good, what is health from disease, wisdom from folly, patriotism from sedition.

Theologians as well as poets, philosophers, prophets and politicians have at times exalted madness over reason and reason over madness. Their explanations attempt to banish madness from the realm of reason and banish reason from the realm of madness. But in the kingdom that Jesus is bringing there are no exiles. Being chosen no longer means being a type or category of person. In the kingdom being chosen means being assigned a new task by which you will be transformed/redefined

In today’s gospel we encounter leprosy. In Jesus’ time, lepers like many other people and things were thought to be ritually unclean. They were banned from ordinary public interaction. The first striking detail in this story is that these lepers would even dare/risk showing themselves in public.

Nevertheless, in Jesus presence, the power of internalized self-negating behavior is overcome. The lepers reach beyond the boundaries defined by their society and beg Jesus to heal them. “Jesus, have mercy on us”.

Jesus calls out to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests. Effectively “Go and reveal the heinous mechanism, uncover yourselves and expose the formula that negates your being. Walk out of the hell to which you have been consigned by this world.

One of them notices he has been healed and even though he is not a child of the covenant of Israel he returns to Jesus to offer ecstatic praise and gratitude to God. Jesus notices that the other lepers have not likewise returned to offer thanks and praise. And this is where this lesson gets so very deep. We have arrived at the intersection of freedom and grace.

Grace is a free gift, an unmerited gift and doesn't require even merited thanksgiving. The others who were healed will still be living witnesses to the power of God. Their healing will be noticed and will not be explainable by any other means-- they are freed twice. From their disease and from their debt. Jesus notices. His care is still extended to them. Turning to God has to be a free choice.

Moving forward really quickly for a second in the history of the West, as cities began to appear. Buildings are erected as leper houses sometimes at the edges of the city. Lepers were handily removed from our sight. Once leprosy was overcome, these same buildings are in order eventually used for those with venereal disease, the poor as workhouses, the insane, and criminals. More sorting and separating. Keeping out of sight the things we would rather not see or own as products of our culture. It is easier to label their disorder as a sign of evil and imagine it is a sign also of God's punishment. And so, we have not come so very far in this matter.

Those who do not return are perhaps not able to escape the prison of separation imposed on them by society. Perhaps a bridge too far. The pain may be too deep and by now familiar enough to be seen as a friend, at the very least a companion.

And so, humility distinguishes the one who returns to offer praise. And only humility will distinguish any one of us. Only humility can lead to the recognition of our own need for healing, for God's guidance, for God's steadfast love and that God wants to heal us.

Amen.

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