

Proper 23 C October 13, 2007

Who are the Lepers Today?

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to you O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN.

It feels good to be out of prison! I thank all of you who thought of praying for Nancy Burchette and me while we were behind the walls of the Federal Penitentiary in Dublin. So many things can go wrong when you are in a prison setting. After all, these are women who have committed crimes, and some of the crimes were violent. So it is no small thing that we do when we sign up for this kind of ministry. I have worked with women prisoners before, so it wasn't too much of a stretch for me to know I could manage the weekend.

However, in the county jail setting, I could leave when it was time to eat. I've seen prison food—it isn't appealing! So that was really my only fear in going to the Kairos weekend, having to eat the food with the inmates. I am happy to report that out of the six meals I shared with the ladies each one was completely acceptable and a couple of them were downright good! Thank you God for sparing me! The bad news is that the weekend, although extraordinarily demanding emotionally and spiritually, it is physically very sedate and so I'm sad to report I gained two pounds!

Are you curious about who's back in the prison? Would you like to know who is in there and why? I can tell you that our country has the highest ratio of prisoners in the whole world. We have more people behind bars than any country on Earth. Have you ever wondered why?

I think its safe to assume that you haven't given it much thought. Most of us are very removed from the criminal justice system and I'm sure we are all happy to keep it that way! I'm very intrigued by police/legal TV programming, but that is a fantasy world. I don't have much exposure to it in real life, and most days I'm content not to know any more than I do.

What about the people who are suffering from HIV/AIDS? Do we hear much about that anymore? My baby brother died of AIDS in 1994 and yet I try not to think about it much.

We hear a lot about the war in Iraq. My great nephew, Steven Noble returned from Iraq last month. The thought that my little nephew shot and killed someone is too much for me to bear. Did killing someone change him? What about the terrible tactics of the military and the CIA using torture to get information? Do we think much about that issue?

We have an immigration crisis on our hands. I saw a dark comedy some time ago called "A Day without Mexicans". It showed that the country would come to a screeching halt without the labor force that undocumented workers provide. Have we thought much about the consequences of our immigration laws?

We are the only so-called civilized nation on the planet that still uses the death penalty. We have legally sanctioned killing and unfortunately, we have killed many innocent people in our rush to keep society safe.

Women in prison, men on death row, political prisoners, undocumented laborers, people who have HIV/AIDS these are the lepers of our day. These are the people who are hidden from our view; the ones we don't see. These are they we *choose* not to see. These people and the circumstances of their lives represent the justice issues of our day. These issues don't have easy answers—there is no black and white solution to these concerns. What should we do about them—*can* we do anything about them? What would Jesus Christ do?

As big and complicated as the issues are, we are called to address these situations. Most especially because the issues represent people—people who have no voice in the public arena just as the lepers of Jesus' day had no recourse, no one to speak for them.

I was at the pastor's meeting the other day—the pastors of the “church without shoes” and I learned a wonderful thing. The spirit of justice seeking is beginning to touch their hearts. I find it so interesting to be in prayer with this deeply committed group of spiritual leaders because they always—unfailingly call me back to my Gospel roots, to my relationship with Jesus Christ.

Justice ministry is a relatively new area of ministry for this group. So one church has decided to designate one of their pastors to do justice and mercy ministry. The other pastors are in awe of this new undertaking. They too, are beginning to feel this tug at their hearts. For many years the Evangelical churches have focused on building up their churches; building them up to the exclusion of concerns in the community let alone the world. Their idea of outreach was to do mission trips to bring the natives to Jesus Christ. They were not focused on the crushing poverty they witnessed in those countries.

I can understand their strategy. In spite of all the controversy of the Anglican Communion and the peace and justice ministry of our own Bishop Marc, I have largely ignored all that to focus on the needs of our parish. In a recent conversation with our Presiding Bishop, I told her I was troubled by my narrow focus on the parish. She encouraged me to continue on this path. She said that the work of developing my parish is the best thing I can do in the midst of the crisis of our Church. Yet, I still felt unease in my heart.

Part of my unease came to the fore because one of the inspirations for the Evangelical pastor's work is the work of the Episcopal Church. Imagine that we are one of the models for their journey into this new path for them! As we prayed for this new work, the pastor said that he had a switch that he could flip whenever he heard about a justice issue. This switch gave him the ability to turn off whatever concerns were burning in his heart. The problem was that his switch had broken and he could no longer turn away from the work of justice. He felt that God was calling him to look for the way that God's justice could infiltrate our actions in the community, the nation, and the world.

Just the day before I had a meeting with one of our church members who feels a huge burden about justice issues. She shared her concern that so often we are numb to the suffering around us; some of it inflicted in our name. I shared with her that in the last several weeks I had received letters, emails, and phone calls about the death penalty, prison issues, the immigration crisis, global poverty and our government's torture of prisoners.

It seems overwhelming and yet—I am certain that Jesus Christ expects us to find a way to address these concerns. Hearing that pastor pray as he tremulously begins this new work confirmed for me that I couldn't turn the switch off either. It seemed more than providential that I was there to hear his witness, especially on the heels of all the communication I'm getting and that intense meeting with one of our concerned church members.

Leprosy is a thing of the past—it's called Hansen's disease in our day—so we don't hear about leprosy much. But the unease that surrounds it is still with us, the mistreatment of those we want to ignore is still alive in our hearts and minds. We still act as though there are people whose needs we can ignore. But God won't allow us to ignore them. God still claims them as valuable and immensely loveable and God is hoping we will too.

As to the practical part of how we'd manage to do this—well I think we need to do it the Episcopal way—by forming a committee! The first step is to gather with a few folks who feel a call in their hearts to address these concerns. Together we'll decide how to manage the barrage of themes that could emerge.

I was so perplexed by the knowledge that the justice work of the Episcopal Church is one of the inspirations for this Evangelical pastor's new ministry. I just know that I've been drawn to this group of pastors because there is a new spirit building in the Churches that are founded on Jesus Christ.

The fact is, the problems we face are too big for any one person to address, but they are also too big for any one church to address. Perhaps the real lesson is that we are called to work with anyone who is working to resolve injustice. I think we need to work together so that we don't feel overwhelmed with the magnitude of the issues.

We all lead extremely busy lives. But in the midst of all our busyness we must model our concern for people who can't speak for themselves. If our children and grandchildren never experience our passion to work for God's justice, then they will not learn how they can have an impact on the world. Even as we head toward the end of our first year together—and we've accomplished wonderful things—it would be incomplete without including this piece of the ministry God is calling us to do together.

It's easy and tempting to keep our focus on our own needs and concerns. I understand that, but I also know that our health as a congregation would be greatly enhanced by balancing our existing care and concern for our current ministries and outreach with a new effort to work on justice issues.

There were ten lepers healed that day, one came back to give thanks and praise to God. Yet the Gospel lesson is not about the nine ungrateful lepers and it's not about the one who came back to give thanks. Jesus Christ is teaching us that no one should be denied the blessing of our care for them—whether they come back to thank us or not. The healings that Jesus Christ did in all the stories are different. Sometimes he touches people, and sometimes he just says the words of healing. The important thing is that in all cases Jesus Christ did something—he acted. Jesus Christ is calling on us to act now. If your switch is broken and you feel a tug to figure out how to address the injustices to God's people, I hope to hear from you. Amen.