



homily

atonement: the savior's unity and connectedness with us

a man full of leprosy

luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴ (part 1)

¹²*When he was in a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy: who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean."

¹³And he put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, "I will: be thou clean."

And immediately the leprosy departed from him. ¹⁴And he charged him to tell no man: but go, and shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing, according as Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.

Introduction

This, and the two following homilies on Luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴ are focused on our Atonement title: "Atonement: The Savior's unity and connectedness with us."¹ These three homilies are follow-up to three meditations in which we examined 1) the choice of the word, "atonement" to represent Jesus' salvific work, 2) the meaning of the word as we understand and use it, and 3) how the word represents the central mission of Jesus and the eternal character of Divinity.²

In these meditations, we have suggested that atonement is best seen as "connectedness," "attachment," "linkage," and "unity." The word, atonement, reflects God's feelings of

¹ The ten titles are: "Fall: Our Need of Atonement;" "Grace: The Savior's Generous and Earnest Invitation;" "At-one-ment: The Savior's unity and connectedness with us;" "Sacrifice: What Jesus Suffered for Us;" "Glorification: The Savior's Resurrection, Ascension, and Enthronement;" "Justification: How We Repent and Change;" "Renewal: The Hope, Joy, Peace, and Power of Atonement;" "Sanctification: Imitating and living Jesus' life of Atonement;" "Thanksgiving: In Praise of Atonement;" and "The Song of the Righteous: A Song unto Me."

² "Meditation 2: The Choice of the Word, Atonement," "Meditation 3: The Meaning of The Word, Atonement," and "Meditation 4: Atonement as the Central, Eternal and Divine Characteristic of God," all found on the Atonement page of this sight.

connectedness to humans. This divine connectedness to others is central and internal to God's character. It is as eternal as He is. Atonement existed before Jesus' earthly ministry and will exist for all time because it is in God.

The central purpose of Jesus' ministry was to reveal the nature and character of his Father. In regard to atonement, Jesus revealed rather than created Divinity's connectedness to humans. Jesus' revelation of divine connectedness was immeasurably superior to the revelation of any other ministry, before or after, which attempted or attempts to reveal the nature of God and the extent of His connectedness to humanity. Jesus' revelation of God and of His atonement—connectedness—was superior because Jesus was, as the Book of Mormon states, "God, Himself, or, as Paul states, "in him [Jssus] dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2.⁹).

Jesus', and thus the Father's, divine connectedness to humanity was exhibited in his incarnation and in his every word, thought, and action from the cradle to the grave. Having been resurrected, having ascended into heaven, and having sat down on the right hand of God, Jesus, as his Father, continues to feel connected to humans and continues to act upon those feelings for the benefit and advancement of the human race.

If individuals are to be happy, endure, and progress, they must embrace Divinity's connectedness to them, develop themselves, the divine character of at-one-ment, connectedness, and act upon that character in this life and on into eternity. There can be no enduring and progressive existence without, first, connectedness to Deity, and then connectedness to all others, indeed, to all that exists in nature and in the cosmos. It is impossible, then, to overestimate the value of Jesus' earthly ministry and the New Testament Gospels that report his lifelong example and revelation of divine at-one-ment.

In this homily, we examine an example of atonement as connectedness as found in Jesus' earthly ministry. Because a picture is worth a thousand words, we want to examine atonement as connectedness utilizing scripture passages from the life of Jesus rather than passages that address atonement as connectedness in principle. We will look at passages that describe atonement as connectedness in principle in future posts.

a man covered with leprosy

In Luke’s narrative, “a man full of leprosy” approached Jesus. This man “fell on his face, and besought him, saying, “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.” It is important to note that the leper was “*full* of leprosy.” He was “covered” with leprosy. His was not a mild case of leprosy. No one could have mistaken his condition or the severity of his leprosy. We are shocked at the very fact that the man could bring himself to approach Jesus, whom he clearly believed to be a holy man of God. Before considering the leper, himself, and Jesus’ willing and radical response to him, we should take a moment to consider what the Hebrew Bible has to say about lepers and what it would have us understand about the leper’s status with their community and with God. This will allow us to understand the nature of our shock at the leper’s approaching Jesus and the reason for viewing Jesus’ response to him as radical.

But, first, perhaps a warning is in order. We can and should find symbolism in the leper and his experience with his community and with God. However, we must not make a caricature of ancient lepers. Ancient Israelite lepers really did exist. They were real people with real thoughts and feelings. They lived out all or parts of their lives under the conditions and stigmas described in the Hebrew Bible. So, the teachings found in the Hebrew Bible—teachings that reflected not only upon the character and status of lepers but upon the very character of God—had real, life-altering impacts on real thinking and feeling people. In addition, these teachings have an impact on every believer’s thoughts about and feelings toward God.

With that warning in mind, we now turn our attention to the social and spiritual status of lepers as the Hebrew Bible describes them. We read the following in Leviticus.

“When a man shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising, a scab, or bright spot, and it be in the skin of his flesh like the plague of leprosy; then he shall be brought unto Aaron the priest, or unto one of his sons the priest: and the priest shall look on the plague in the skin of the flesh: and when the hair in the plague is turned white, and the plague in sight be deeper than the skin of his flesh, it is a plague of leprosy: and the priest shall look on him,

and *pronounce him unclean.*”³

The key concept to glean from this passage is that leprosy is “uncleanness.” This refers to both the physical and spiritual. We should expand on the societal and spiritual nature and meaning of being “unclean.”

“And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: *he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be.*”⁴

Because the leper is “unclean” and “impure” he is made to live in solitude outside an Israelite camp and, later, city. The leper is an outcast. Disenfranchised by God and community.

“Command the children of Israel, that they *put out of the camp every leper*, and every one that hath an issue, and whosoever is defiled by the dead: both male and female shall ye put out, without the camp shall ye put them; *that they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof I dwell.*”⁵

The leper is made to live a solitary existence outside population centers because they “defile” or “dirty” those places where they live. Now, it is customary to think that quarantining lepers was the result of the fear of contagion and so an attempt to keep leprosy from spreading. It is likely true that they did not understand, as we do today, that leprosy was not easily communicated from one person to another. It required close, intimate, and extended contact with leprosy before it spread to another. But, *as far as the text is concerned*, the level of contagion that leprosy posed is neither here nor there. We cannot emphasize this too much: *The text does not mention the fear of human contagion as the reason for quarantining lepers.*

Or, perhaps, it would be better to say that the text does not mention concern over the

³ Leviticus 13.²⁻³, emphasis added.

⁴ Leviticus 13.⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶

⁵ Numbers 5.²⁻³, italics added.

possibility of lepers defiling other *humans*. Rather, the worry is that the leper defiles *God!* The leper is removed from “the camp,” not because humans lived there, but because God dwelt there: “that they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof *I* dwell.”

God promised to dwell in the midst of his people. But He could not, it was believed, dwell in the midst of “uncleanness.” If there was uncleanness in the camp, God would be offended and leave. Using the language of atonement as we understand it, God would disconnect. Detach. Disassociate Himself from Israel. He would not be at-one with a leper or a people who gave admittance to lepers.

Consider, now, the following passage.

“And thou shalt have a paddle [shovel] upon thy weapon; and it shall be, when thou wilt ease thyself abroad [a Hebrew euphemism for your English euphemism ‘going to the bathroom,’ i.e., defecating] thou shalt dig therewith, and shalt turn back and cover that which cometh from thee: for the LORD thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp... therefore shall thy camp be holy: *that he see no unclean thing in thee, and turn away from thee.*”⁶

What, the reader may ask, does this passage have to do leprosy and lepers? God’s response to human poop is remarkably similar to His response to lepers! Both offend his senses and cause him to “turn away,” disconnect, disassociate, and leave. Such Biblical assertions about God as those found above likely influenced the Book of Mormon’s conclusion that “the kingdom of God is not filthy, and there cannot any *unclean* thing enter into the kingdom of God.”⁷ What was true of the kingdom of God was true of Israel’s camps and cities. God could not abide where uncleanness was present.

Now, one might wonder why an ailment such as leprosy, seemingly only physical, would trigger such a negative divine reaction. We must remember that leprosy, like many illnesses,⁸

⁶ Deuteronomy 23.¹³⁻¹⁴; emphasis added.

⁷ 1 Nephi 15.³⁴, italics added.

⁸ Many examples could be sighted. Consider just these two: Psalm 38.¹⁻⁷, and 1 Corinthians 11.²⁹⁻³⁰.

was associated with sin and thought to be indicative of sin. For example, as a result of Aaron's and Miriam's sin,

“The anger of the LORD was kindled against them; and he departed. And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous. And Aaron said unto Moses, ‘Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, *lay not the sin upon us*, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother's womb.’”⁹

Leprosy was not only associated with sin. It was associated with death, both physical and spiritual.

Conclusion

To recap. Leprosy was indicative of sin. The leper was considered unclean and unholy. Because of uncleanness, the leper was made to live in solitude and outside populated areas. The leper's removal from camps, villages, cities, synagogues, temples, etc., was the consequence of the fear that God would see the uncleanness and abandon the camps, villages, cities, synagogues, temples, etc. According to the Hebrew Bible, then, leprosy was a kind of anti-at-one-ment. Leprosy was thought to produce detachment and disconnectedness from, and disunity with God.

All this helps explain our shock that a man “full of leprosy” would approach Jesus. We are most assuredly justified in assuming that the man thought of Jesus as a man of God. Thus, he certainly must have considered it a strong possibility that Jesus would reject him and refuse, not only as any holy man would do, but as God would do, to be associated or connected with him in any way, shape, or form. The leper would certainly have known that on the off chance that Jesus should engage in any way with him, Jesus would, himself, become unclean and defiled. Once his engagement with the leper was discovered, Jesus, like the leper, would almost certainly have been excluded from synagogue and temple for at least twenty-four

⁹ Numbers 12.⁹⁻¹², emphasis added.

hours—and maybe longer, given that his engagement with the leper was not an accident, but was performed with such blatant disregard for accepted religious standards.

And yet, the leper approached Jesus. Why? How? Perhaps the leper's approach speaks only of his desperation. But, I think, we can go further. Just as we are justified in assuming that the leper considered Jesus a holy man, we are justified in assuming that he must have considered it possible that the holy Jesus would not reject him, but receive and help him. He must have seen or heard something in Jesus that led him to think that Jesus might just be unorthodox and radical enough to ignore, flout, even, the Hebrew Bible's prohibitions and the religious conventions of his day concerning engagement with a leper.

The leper was rewarded for his belief in both Jesus' holiness and his radical unorthodoxy. Contrary to the Hebrew Bible's assertions and the expectations of his day, Jesus, portraying and acting like God as he always did, put the lie to God's detachment and disconnectedness with lepers. But, more, Jesus put the lie to God's detachment and disconnectedness to the confessing and importuning sinner. Like his Father, Jesus, was not offended by the leper and made no attempt to avoid him, disassociate or disconnect himself from him. Jesus could not be defiled by puny, weak human uncleanness. Such human uncleanness was impotent in the face of divine power and connectedness.

Yes, the leper was right to think that Jesus was a radically connected man. His life was one of connection and at-one-ment. As we will see in the following homilies, Jesus will reveal his own and his Father's radical connectedness by quite literally and physically attaching himself to the unclean and potentially defiling leper.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: December 9, 2024)