

### When God Is at Work

They really didn't understand it. But, of course, they really had no means to. How could they possibly know that it was contagious only after long periods of very close contact? The only thing they knew about it was what it looked like and what it did to a person in the advanced stages.

That they knew well. They understood how it maimed and disfigured. And that was enough for fear to take over. I'm talking about the disease of leprosy. In a world and a time in which the disease has all but been eradicated except in small pockets, we perhaps cannot appreciate the fear that accompanied this word in the ancient world of Jesus.

It was a red flag word. It brought about the same responses as the word Plague did in the 1200's, or Small Pox in the 1700's, or AIDS in the 1900's. It frightened them. They felt largely helpless against it, as indeed they were. What happens **when fear takes over is people do not act, they react**. And reactions to leprosy were both swift and cruel.

In times not far removed from our own people would be put to death by their own family. It seems incredible to us today, but on the edge of every large city in the ancient world huge pits were dug, and in those pits lived the lepers of the community. And if, by some remote possibility, they did escape this hovel and venture out into the streets, they would be quickly greeted with shouts of "leper," accompanied by stones to make them keep their distance.

In Jesus' day a leper by law could not get within fifty yards of a clean person. So this was the heart of the matter. Not only did these wretched poor people have to endure the trials of an incurable affliction, they also were isolated from society and kept from the community of faith.

The horror of disease, a lifestyle of loneliness, isolation and hopelessness: where could they find hope? The only friend a leper had was God himself. In this life they were doomed. It was walking death. This, then, is the background of the leper we meet this morning. What can we learn from this man's tragic story?

### Never as Stereotypes

Jesus always met men and women on the level of their need, regardless of who they were or what they had done. **He met everyone as human beings**, never as stereotypes. Stereotypes were as powerful then as they are now.

Once a label is placed on a person the human being vanishes. Many labels were given to people in the New Testament -- such labels as tax collector, Samaritan, Roman soldier, prostitute, rich young man, Pharisee, sinner or publican.

They all appear in the gospel narrative, and every time Jesus completely ignores the label and deals with the person. This is certainly true of his encounters with Matthew, Zacchaeus, the traveler on the Jericho road, the centurion, Mary Magdalene, and Nicodemus. David H.C. Read points out that "Jesus knew the ugly side of society -- the brutality of the occupation, the corruption of the tax system, the racial prejudices, the economic injustice, the religious hypocrisy, and the sexual degradation.

But never once did these factors blind him to the reality of the human being, the unique son or daughter of God he saw before him." (by John A. Stroman from *God's Downward Mobility*, CSS Publishing Company

### Loneliness

We need a community around us. Years ago, when speaker of the house Sam Rayburn heard that he had terminal cancer, he shocked everyone when he announced that he was going back to his small town in Bonham, Texas. Everyone said to him: They have got the finest facilities in Washington, D. C., why go back to that little town. Rayburn's words have been quoted so often that some of you have probably heard them. He said: "Because in Bohman, Texas, **they know if you're sick and they care when you die.**" We need community. (from [www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com))

### I Thought I'd Call

There is a story about a New York City policeman investigating a case. Even before he finished dialing, he somehow knew he'd made a mistake. The phone rang once, twice - then someone picked it up. "You've got the wrong number!" a husky male voice snapped before the line went dead. Mystified, the policeman dialed again. "I said you got the wrong number!" came the voice. Once more the phone clicked down.

"How could he possibly know I had the wrong number?" The policeman asked himself. A cop is trained to be curious - and concerned. So he dialed a third time. "Hey, c'mon," the voice said. "Is this you again?" "Yea, it's me. I was wondering how you knew I had the wrong number before I even said anything." "You figure it out!" The phone slammed down. He sat there for a while, the receiver hanging loosely in his fingers.

He called the man back. "Did you figure it out yet?" the man asked. "The only thing I can think of is nobody ever calls you." "You got it!" The phone went dead for the fourth time. Chuckling, the officer dialed the man back. "What do you want now?" asked the man. "I thought I'd call - just to say hello." "Hello? Why?" "Well, if nobody ever calls you, I thought maybe I should." (by Gary Nicolosi from *The Wideness of God's Mercy*)