

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 14, 2021

Reflection by Sister Susan Quaintance, OSB

Lv 13:1-2, 44-46; 1 Cor 10:31—11:1; Mk 1:40-45

A leper came to him [and kneeling down] begged him and said, “If you wish, you can make me clean. Moved with anger, Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him and said to him, “I do will it.”

You probably picked up that I changed a word there from what we heard proclaimed in the gospel. Though most translations use the word “pity” or “compassion” in verse 41, a fair number (7 out of the 61 English translations on the Bible Gateway site – oh, the wonders of the Google machine!) use the word “anger” or “indignation.” That’s because several early Greek manuscripts used “anger.” Commentators speculate that an early scribe probably changed “anger” to “pity” because why would the switch happen the other way around? Though Matthew and Luke both have this exact same story, they leave that phrase out. (Can’t you hear them? “Oh, I’m not going near that one with a ten-foot pole . . . just skip it!”) At any rate there were some divergent opinions about whether Jesus responded in anger or compassion.

But the linguistic plot thickens. In verse 43, after Jesus heals the leper, Mark reports that “warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once.” According to the *Oxford Biblical Commentary*, the verb used there is a rare one, a word indicating intense anger.

This all made me kind of uncomfortable. I’d much prefer to think about a compassionate Jesus instead of a livid one. That was a pretty good clue to me that that’s what I’d better think about.

So why might Jesus have been angry here? He could have been upset with the man with leprosy for coming close to him and making him ritually unclean, but that seems unlikely since he engages with him and heals him in short order. Perhaps he might have been frustrated by the complicated and numerous Jewish purity rituals that seemed more concerned with keeping people like this man at a distance from the community, instead of bringing them to healing, wholeness, and reintegration. But, since he next tells the man to go show himself to the priest, the next stage in those rituals, that seems unlikely, too. It must have been the disease itself that provoked some kind of profound feeling in Jesus, whether it was pity or indignation. Human suffering moved him in deep and visceral ways.

Does suffering move me like that? Sometimes. Sometimes not. There’s just so much, right? There are world issues: climate change and the willful destruction of the environment; hunger; genocide; the suppression of dissent and democracy; vast numbers of refugees and displaced persons. There’s

our country: racism and white supremacy, bigotry of all kinds; poverty and unequal access to education, healthcare, basic human services, thousands of small – and large – businesses which have died in the past year. And I have yet to say two words – global pandemic – it has wrought mind-boggling suffering. Then there’s our life in community. Loss has hit us hard lately. Big questions loom about our future. Each of us has personal trials and sorrows, and I don’t know about most of them. In my work I see the results of social isolation and loneliness. There’s a tremendous amount of anxiety and dis-ease of every kind.

Really, it’s a lot. Who’s to blame me if I watch re-runs on TV, and eat more than I should, and do whatever else I do to numb myself up?

Jesus, apparently.

The verse that would not leave me alone as I thought about all of this was “If today you hear God’s voice, harden not your hearts.” That’s a re-arranged verse 8 from Psalm 95, which reminds us about what happened at Meribah and Massah, where the Israelites tested God because they were upset about not having water – another source of suffering in our world . . . which seems a valid cause for alarm. Like them, when I am apprehensive or afraid or confused or overwhelmed, it is much easier to pick at other people or be mad at God, or just shut down. It is easier to harden my heart.

On this Valentine’s Day, the call may well be to soften my heart, let myself be moved to tears or rage. It is, after all, what Jesus did.