

Epiphany VI Year B

“I do choose. Be made clean. Immediately the leprosy left him and the man was made clean.”

If you read my blog this past week you know I’ve been reflecting on various commentaries on the Oscar nominated movie *The Help*, and that has also caused me to think of my family’s (my growing up family’s) housekeeper, nurse, cook, friend, my second mother, Azzie Lee...my family’s so-called “Help” who worked for us for over twenty five years.

When Azzie Lee died she left her house to her beloved uncle, who was as she put it.... “was somewhere right close to a hundred years old.” He made his living all of his working life caning chairs, you know, the art of weaving splint oak or rush canes into intricate and somewhat elaborate and strong seats of chairs....its cousin in the east would be rattan...be for us southerners it’s caning...and we never saw uncle K without his work before him.... Azzie Lee took him in to her home the last few years of her life; his health failing.

One day during the work week, a couple of years after Azzie Lee’s death, I was in my late twenties, my mother called...her voice anxious, and said she needed my help, and could I break away from the office for an hour or so; I said yes “I’ll explain things in the car”, she said. An elderly neighbor who lived next door to uncle K...it seemed all the neighbors on this water worn unpaved street were old....Toad St....perhaps named at the whim of a boorish city official...an elderly neighbor called and said uncle K was bad sick; that he had not been able to get out of bed for a week...she had bought him medicine from the store, but couldn’t move him....but she wondered if my mother could or would get help....so we drove across town, past where the sidewalks ended, across the railroad tracks, through derelict neighborhoods; families gathered on rotting porches....a matriarch in short staccato strokes sweeping her dirt yard....shirtless children toddling along the sandy shoulder of a muddy and potholed road....these the nameless poor who live across the divide.

We arrived at the house.... “This is going to be hard my mother said.” I knew what she meant when we opened the front door and could smell the task that was before us....we told him who we were, half shouting back to his bedroom of the shotgun house, and a feeble voice invited us in....I didn’t want to go...It was true he had not been able to leave his bed for days living on saltine crackers, water and cough medicine, and the sheets of course were fouled and rank....We got his fragile and soiled body up and over to the bathtub....I bathed him while my mother washed the bed linens....he looked at us with red watery eyes and said, “I’m sorry about all this...but I sho thank you”... We called our family doctor, a cousin of ours, one of the friendly ones, and he arranged to have uncle K admitted to the hospital and he sent an ambulance....Uncle K moved to Florida to be taken care of by his daughter whom we never knew he had, another of the nameless hidden behind the veil of poverty... we got word a couple of years later that he had died. Certainly I did not know it then, but I was forever changed by this brief, but profound experience. It is still a prominent memory for me, not one of those lost in the cortex where dead memories go to be laid to rest. It is as if our souls through the mind’s

eye arrange the memories of our histories, so that we may perhaps get a glimpse of the truth of who we are, or might be.

In our gospel reading for today Jesus touches and heals a leper....one of the outcasts of his world...one who quite literally lives across the divide....It was considered by the tradition that to come into contact with a leper would render one ritually unclean, which would mean alienation from the community for a time, or worse possibly contracting the disease....In other words Jesus crosses a boundary here to heal the leper....If we were to read what we have been reading in Mark over the last weeks all at once....we would see dramatically the point the writer is making....that the healing ministry of Jesus is exponentially exploding on the scene...we're only a chapter in to Mark, and Jesus can't even enter a village without being swarmed by the overwhelming needs of the people.

So let's review again the overall premise of this gospel: that this narrative is about the life and responsibility of the baptized; and the responsibility of the Baptized is to bring resurrection life to a moribund world; and that there is urgency, immediacy to this call.... And we also notice that this resurrection life is intimately associated with healing...So we are told that not only are we to be healers as the baptized...but that the need for healing is so very great and immediate in our world.

As you know I am always suggesting that we as people of faith have a say in our world...enlightened and informed and gracious activism for the good of the whole...I still believe that....I told Sunny Roberts last week at her Baptism at the 8:00 service the she was to be a world changer, an activist for compassion and justice and mercy and dignity and non violence....but in reading Mark I think I want to say that another way...yes, we are activists for the truth, but more than that we are healers, restorers of health, repairers of the breach; healers of the diseases, diseases literal and figurative, diseases that divide us and belie the wholeness of the human community....so perhaps advocates is a better word by which to describe ourselves as people of faith....advocates, agents of healing in a world overwhelmed with the need to be healed.....and that means we must go where the illness is...we must cross boundaries...taboos, cross the proverbial railroad tracks and go where we might not want to go ...into the foulness of the lost corners of the human community and make clean that which God has intended all along to be clean. We are with healing touch to care for the leprous injustices and feverish social and economic imbalances of our world....we must cross the divide, the divide being sin itself; that which would separate us from each other as the human community; sin, not the little things we do or leave undone, but sin the structures of our society that divide us.

I've learned over my life, I think, something about love....this experience I recounted to you today surely a part of my learning, and that is: that love is a choice. This passage we read today is a little peculiar linguistically....We are told that Jesus took pity on the leper, but the word for pity also can mean anger....and with this overwhelming need of these throngs of people, people lined up at doorways...with this exploding ministry surely Jesus is overwhelmed...perhaps here he is taken aback as this leper who is supposed to keep a safe distance from anyone and everyone...here he is in Jesus' space, kneeling at his feet no less....and he gives Jesus the choice that all of us dear brothers and sisters have to make at some time or another....He says if you so choose you can make me clean....and Jesus (who I imagine is at least worn out and frustrated) says, perhaps wearily, I do choose, and reaches across the great divide...the divide between

health and infirmity, the divide between included and excluded, the divide between dignity and indignity...across the divide of sin itself...Love is a choice, and mostly those choices take encouragement. I didn't want to go into Azzie Lee's house, but my mother basically encouraged me through her own willingness, her mustered willfulness....we choose to love...we will to love, love a conscious and conscientious act of the will and that takes seasoning and maturity and nurture and courage and last but not least, risk... we have to see such choices modeled for us to believe such a way of life is even possible...that is why we gather as a faith community, not just for solace and comfort, but to learn the art together of choosing love...Love which will cause us to stretch out our hand into unimaginable places and situations.....Love bridges the great divide in our midst.... We gather to learn the art of becoming advocates, restorers of the world's wholeness.....the hue and cry of our world to our God, to our God by any name around the planet over the ages...the hue and cry is.... "If you choose you could make us clean." We dear people of God are the body of Christ, sons and daughters of God....And therefore it is for us to answer that call..... "We do choose!.... Be made clean!"