

OUR TRUE IDENTITY AND ONE TRUE HOME

How many of you are left-handed? Raise your left hand.

Congratulations. Just like me, you're special. You're a rare breed. You belong to an exclusive club. Did you know that only about ten percent of the world's population are "southpaws?"

But there are times when being left-handed can make me feel as though I'm sort of a leper. I'm thinking about those experiences I've had when I've been at a dinner gathering and was directed to a specific seat at the dining room table so I wouldn't bother the right-handed person sitting next to me by bumping elbows with him or her.

"Here, Fred. You sit over in this spot."

It's said that left-handed people mostly use the right side of their brain and are more creative. I don't know if that's actually true, but what I do know is that it's often a pain to be a left-handed person in a right-handed world. It can be seriously annoying and very frustrating. Something as simple as using a pair of scissors or a screwdriver is a significant challenge because they're made for right-handed people.

I remember when I was a kid in first grade, and I couldn't understand why it was so hard for me to cut out paper hearts for Valentine's Day with those cheap, dull scissors my teacher handed out. I got some snickers and rude remarks. But worse than that, I wondered if something was wrong with me, if I might have some physical or mental defect. I looked over at Janie on my right and Stephen on my left, cutting their sheets of red paper into beautiful hearts with no trouble at all, while for me the very same activity was difficult, vexing and frustrating. I felt different from everyone else, like I wasn't as good as all the other cutters of paper around me. I thought that I was a pariah, an outsider. I thought that for some reason, the world was against me. What I didn't realize at the time was that in some ways the world was against me, because it favored right-handed people.

I have this idea for a novel that I would like to write after I'm retired. I've had the idea for a long time, and I thought it would make an interesting story. What if left handed-people were considered an abomination to God.

Like a leper.

What if left-handed people were looked at and judged by others the same way lepers were looked at and judged by people in Jesus day? What if, like a leper, left-handed people were shunned and rejected, not allowed to live in community or worship with others in the same church?

That's not so far-fetched, you know. Back when I was a kid, growing up as a Roman Catholic, some of the nuns who taught young kids in Catholic schools tried to "discourage" those who were left-handed from using their dominant hand by whacking it with a ruler or some other instrument of abuse, and forcing them to use their right hand. Yes, those terrible, frightening rumors are actually true. It never happened to me, thank God, but it did happen to others.

And there's biblical precedent for bias against left-handedness, just like there is against leprosy. In the Bible, it's obvious that right-handed people are the preferred ones; and, by inference, they're avored by God. For example, in Matthew 25, in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, the Lord directed the good and faithful sheep to the right, while the not so faithful, bad sheep were told to line up on the left. And in Isaiah 41, God said, "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Okay, so if God's right hand is righteous, it must mean that the devil is left-handed.

I brought up the Bible's bias against left-handed people because it can help us comprehend, at least to a limited degree, how lepers were perceived and treated in Jesus' day and age. It can allow us to get a feel for the way lepers were looked upon and treated differently than everyone else. And it opens our eyes to the way Jesus shattered those kinds of biased perceptions and negative treatment of others who were outside the norm with the good news of God's loving acceptance and divine grace.

This morning's Gospel reading about the ten lepers who encountered Jesus speaks to the deepest questions about our identity and our humanity. Its underlying message is about exclusion and inclusion, exile and return. And at its heart, it's a story about the Kingdom of God—about who is welcome to enter God's realm, who belongs in it, and who are citizens of it. And the answer might just surprise us.

I think those are the kinds of questions many nations in our world, including our own, are wrestling with today regarding the issue of immigration. And they're not intellectual or abstract questions. They're emotional and urgent. They have to do with the basic value and worth of all human beings, and whether

we recognize and acknowledge so-called outsiders as people of God. And they have to do with the way our treatment of immigrants and refugees is linked to how we're called to live out our faith and calling as followers of Christ.

I'm talking about questions such as:

What is our responsibility as Christians in deciding whether outsiders can belong or don't belong in community with us? Will we accept and treat them with mercy and compassion, as human beings who were made in God's image; or as something less than human, an outcast, a rejected, unclean, undesirable, modern day leper? Will we allow them to experience the light of God's all-encompassing love, or will we shove them away and force them to exist in the shadows of hatred, prejudice and fear? Those are questions this morning's gospel reading are asking through Jesus' encounter with the ten lepers. And those are questions Jesus sought to answer by showing those lepers the inclusive, transforming, redemptive power of God.

I recently read a story by Denise Jordan about an extended family trip to India that she went on when she was a child. She wrote: One morning, as my father was standing in line to buy tickets at a village train station, my little brother pointed to two figures sitting hunched in a corner. "What's wrong with them?" he asked.

By then we had been in India for two weeks, and I was accustomed to seeing beggars, in the form of exhausted women with severely underfed babies on their hips; men who were blind or lame; and malnourished, pot-bellied children who stared longingly at my Western clothes. New to witnessing such dire need, I spent my days digging in my father's wallet or my mother's purse, handing out every bill or coin they would spare. But these two figures I'd caught sight of were different. Although I had assumed that they needed help, too, I didn't want to approach them. Their faces were distorted and their flesh eaten away. Some of their fingers were missing, and their feet were scary, discolored stumps.

"They're sick," my father answered after a quick, pitying glance in their direction. "They have leprosy."

The train station was crowded that day, swarming with travelers, vendors and beggars. But what struck me about those two figures huddling in the shadows was how alone they were. It was other-worldly, profound and perplexing in a way I could barely fathom. It was as though some invisible yet impenetrable barrier, as solid as granite, separated them from the rest of humanity, making them wholly untouchable. Yes, their disease frightened me; but what frightened me even more was their isolation, their not-belonging.

Their not-belonging. The lepers in this morning's reading from Luke didn't belong. They also lived in the shadows—in a no-man's land, looked down upon and considered human trash and forced to exist on the outskirts of a society and community that was intended for humans who were believed to be of more value.

Those ten lepers were legally required to stay in total isolation, staying far away from other people, wearing rags for clothes and covered in filth, and forced by law to proclaim to others their own contamination with loud, humiliating cries: "Unclean! Unclean!" So, when Jesus healed their leprosy, he didn't merely cure their physical bodies. He restored their identities. He enabled them to return to the life and existence they had been denied for so long that makes us human—family, community, society, and intimacy.

In healing their withered skin and rotting limbs, Jesus released them from their hellish prison of sickness and forced segregation so they could feel again; they could embrace and be embraced, and they could worship in fellowship with their religious kinfolk as they had done years before. In other words, they were freed by Christ so they could reclaim the social and spiritual ties that their disease had stolen from them.

To put it another way, Jesus entered their "no-man's land—a land of no-belonging—and handed out ten unblemished passports. Jesus invited those ten exiles to return home. Seen from this angle, the tenth leper's response to Jesus resonates differently. Yes, the Samaritan expressed a deep and sincere gratitude. But he was also expressing the joy of a deeper, truer belonging. Belonging to the human family, and, more importantly, belonging to God's family.

All ten lepers were, in essence, made fully human again, and could now live, love, laugh and find acceptance among other human beings. Sort of like what happened to me in first grade. As I sat at my desk, struggling to use a pair of right-handed scissors with my left hand and trying to cut out some paper hearts as the teacher had asked the class to do, the girl to my right, Janie, must have seen me toiling and striving, because she leaned close to me and asked, "Do you want me to help you?"

I handed her my paper and scissors and, quick as a flash, my red paper hearts were finished. And right then and there I experienced my first elementary school crush. I'm over her now. But who wouldn't love someone who accepted you the way you are, differences and all, and showed kindness and compassion in a time of despair.

Ten lepers dutifully stood at a distance as the law required and called to Jesus, "Master." They wanted to return to society, to community, to family, and

to have their humanity recognized and acknowledged.

Jesus healed all ten. But afterwards, one of them—a Samaritan—returned to the divine physician with his heart overflowing with gratitude, because he understood that he'd just been given a better, more permanent relationship in God's Kingdom. He became truly human again. And along with that he found his true identity as one of God's beloved, and his one true home in God's Kingdom.

We can find those things too, when we ask Christ to help us find them. And perhaps, hopefully, God's Kingdom will have left-handed scissors and screwdrivers available on request! If it does, I'll be the first in line.

Thanks be to God. Amen.