

## **Prayer for Tolerance and Understanding September 24, 2007**

The title used for tonight's prayer service, "As I have loved you," comes from what is sometimes known as Jesus' great "High Priestly" prayer. The words are said to his disciples at the final supper they share together in John's gospel. The full context is this: "I give you a new commandment. Love one another as I have loved you."

But we are stuck with the next question. How, exactly, did Jesus love them? How does he love us?

For the answer to that question, I want to take us to the very beginning of Mark's gospel. Mark has written the shortest and, arguably, the most pointed account of this Jesus of Nazareth. It starts with his baptism by John, moves immediately to his being led by God's spirit into the wilderness for 40 days; he then chooses disciples to follow him, and heads to the synagogue in Capernaum and begins to teach. And everyone is amazed at his teaching because it is with power and authority. Then begins a striking series of healing stories: a man with an unclean spirit is set free, Simon's mother-in-law is restored to health, and crowds gather just to see and hear him as he frees crowds of people from their infirmities, physical and spiritual.

Immediately a leper walks up to him and we have just heard that story. This

is the first major controversy Jesus creates in Mark's gospel. He actually touches the leper and heals him. He touches him—something unheard of and unthinkable in first-century Palestine.

What is this story about really? It is not about leprosy as we understand it. This is not what we now call Hansen's disease. No, this man could have had any kind of skin blemish, any kind of physical deformity. Israel's purity code, mostly taken from the book of Leviticus, demanded that anyone who was "blemished" should be shunned and cast out from the community. It was God's law! It was unalterable. You were no longer part of Israel, part of the community.

The physical cure is never the point in Mark's gospel. The big deal here is not the physical healing. As the noted scripture scholar, Fr. Raymond Brown comments on Mark's miracle stories, he says Mark's point is always "to teach about the way God's rule is to destroy all forms of harmful evil, spiritual and physical." Jesus is saying, with power, God is not interested in purity codes—any purity codes, ancient or modern. The old purity codes were mostly about what you could eat and wear; the new purity codes in our own time and church are mostly about sex. Jesus says by his deeds: Purity codes *exclude* those who most need help; God's plan is to *include* all.

"As I have loved you...." Jesus' love is very practical; it is very real; it is

very action oriented. He frees people! He frees them from their own worst fears; he frees us from petty and small concerns about who is with the “in” group and who is in the “out” group. In God’s kingdom, Jesus proclaims, there is no “in” group. We are all God’s children—without exception. There is a beautiful image that Henri Nouwen used once. He said he loved to imagine Jesus’ descent into hell after his death and see Jesus go to reach out first to his dear friend Judas; and he embraces him. Even Judas. We are all God’s children—without exception.

As I look back from tonight, when we were planning this prayer service, we were much too timid and much too minimalist. We talked of engendering tolerance and understanding. That’s a wonderful goal. But it is not Jesus’ gift and command. I can expect tolerance and understanding from the State or Commonwealth, I can demand tolerance and understanding from public institutions. But Jesus asks for—indeed demands—much more. The Christian community is to be a place where people free each other to stand before God and each other as equals, as brothers and sisters, as followers of the Jesus who loves people into life and freedom. In this space, we are called to much more than tolerance and understanding.

We are called to be *passionate* about our acceptance of each other—and all people. I actually did much more research on the gospel passage for tonight than

usual. I was fascinated by the translation that says Jesus looked on the leper *with compassion*. Some translations, like the RSV, say he looked on the leper with pity. That did not seem right to me. I kept looking around and discovered the Greek word used here in Mark's gospel is only used one other place in the entire New Testament. It is in Luke's account of Jesus being challenged by a lawyer who asked: "Who is my neighbor?" We call that story the story of the "Good Samaritan." The man in that story is also "moved with great compassion," the same word.

But to make matters even more interesting, commentators add that many ancient manuscripts translate the word as anger, not compassion or pity at all. Did Jesus look upon the leper with anger as well as compassion? Anger at the injustice, anger at the exclusion of a child of God, anger at old purity codes that had long outlived their usefulness? God knows I get angry whenever I see or experience discrimination or bigotry. Maybe anger is a proper response sometimes, and is a part of loving as Jesus loved.

The gospel tonight does not ask us to be tolerant and understanding. It asks us—commands us—to love. Even to love those who are our enemies and would exclude us. I really am sorry that there are no exceptions to Jesus' command. I really am sorry that there are no "privileged" outcasts, no special disenfranchised,

no entitlement to special care and treatment because you are the one excluded—for whatever reason. There is simply the command to love as Jesus loved us.

And it needs to begin in your heart—and in mine. Peace!