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Luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴— Meditation 1

¹²*When he was in a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy: who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.”

¹³And he put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, “I will: be thou clean.”

And immediately the leprosy departed from him. ¹⁴And he charged him to tell no man: but go, and shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing, according as Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.

Introduction

Rarely do we begin our meditations with an introduction. However, we should note that the following meditations associated with Luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴ are follow-up meditations to three previous meditations in which we examined the choice of the word, “atonement” to represent Jesus’ salvific work, the meaning of the word as we understand and use it, and how the word represents the central and eternal character trait of Divinity.¹

In these meditations, we have suggested that atonement is best seen as “connectedness,” “attachment,” “linkage,” and “unity.” The word, atonement, reflects God’s feelings of connectedness to humans. This divine connectedness to others is central and internal to God’s character. It is as eternal as He is. Atonement existed before Jesus’ earthly ministry and will exist for all time.

The central purpose of Jesus’ ministry was to reveal the nature and character of his Father. In regard to atonement, Jesus revealed rather than created Divinity’s connectedness to humans. Jesus’ revelation of divine connectedness was immeasurably superior to the revelation of any other ministry, before or after, which attempted or attempts to reveal the nature of God and the extent of His connectedness to humanity. Jesus’ revelation of God and of His atonement—connectedness—was superior because Jesus was, as the Book of Mormon states, “God, Himself, or, as Paul states, “in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.”²

Jesus’, and thus the Father’s, divine connectedness to humanity was exhibited in his incarnation and in his every word, thought, and action from the cradle to the grave. Having been resurrected, having ascended into heaven, and having sat down on the right hand of God, Jesus, as his Father, continues to feel connected to humans and continues to act upon those feelings for the benefit and advancement of the human race.

If they are to be happy, endure, and progress, human beings must embrace Divinity’s connectedness to them, develop themselves, the divine character of at-one-ment, connectedness, and act upon that character in this life and on into eternity. There can be no enduring and progressive existence without, first, connectedness to Deity, and then connectedness to all others, indeed, to all that exists in nature and in the cosmos. It is impossible, then, to overestimate the value of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the New Testament Gospels that report his lifelong example and revelation of divine at-one-ment.

¹ “Meditation 2: The Choice of the Word, Atonement,” “Meditation 3: The Meaning of The Word, Atonement,” and “Meditation 4: Atonement as the Central, Eternal and Divine Characteristic of God,” all found on the Atonement page of this sight.

² Colossians 2.⁹

In this meditation, we examine an example of atonement as connectedness as found in Jesus' earthly ministry. As a picture is worth a thousand words, we want to examine atonement as connectedness utilizing scripture passages from the life of Jesus rather than passages that address atonement as connectedness in principle. We will look at passages that describe atonement as connectedness in principle in future meditations.

a man covered with leprosy

In Luke's narrative, "a man full of leprosy" approached Jesus. He "fell on his face, and besought him, saying, 'Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.'" It is important to note that the leper was "full of leprosy." He was "covered" with leprosy. His was not a mild case of leprosy. No one could have mistaken his condition or the severity of his leprosy. We are shocked at the very fact that the man could bring himself to approach Jesus, whom he clearly believed to be a holy man of God. Before, considering the leper, himself, and Jesus' willing and radical response to him, we should take a moment to consider what the Hebrew Bible has to say about lepers and what it would have us understand about the leper's status with their community and with God. This will allow us to understand the nature of our shock at the leper's approaching Jesus and the reason for viewing Jesus' response to him as radical.

But, first, perhaps a warning is in order. We can and should find symbolism in the leper and his experience with his community and with God. However, we must not make a caricature of ancient lepers. Ancient Israelite lepers really did exist. They were real people with real thoughts and feelings. They lived out all or parts of their lives under the conditions and stigmas described in the Hebrew Bible. So, the teachings found in the Hebrew Bible—teachings that reflected not only upon the character and status of lepers but upon the very character of God—had real, life-altering impacts on real thinking and feeling people. In addition, these teachings had an impact on every believer's thoughts about and feelings toward God.

With that warning in mind, we now turn our attention to the social and spiritual status of lepers as the Hebrew Bible describes them. We read the following in Leviticus.

"When a man shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising, a scab, or bright spot, and it be in the skin of his flesh like the plague of leprosy; then he shall be brought unto Aaron the priest, or unto one of his sons the priest: and the priest shall look on the plague in the skin of the flesh: and when the hair in the plague is turned white, and the plague in sight be deeper than the skin of his flesh, it is a plague of leprosy: and the priest shall look on him, and *pronounce him unclean.*"³

The key concept to glean from this passage is that leprosy is "uncleanness." This refers to both the physical and spiritual. We should expand on the societal and spiritual nature and meaning of being "unclean."

"And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, 'Unclean, unclean.' All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: *he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be.*"⁴

Because the leper is "unclean" and "impure" he is made to live in solitude outside an Israelite camp and,

³ Leviticus 13.²⁻³, emphasis added.

⁴ Leviticus 13.⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶

later, city. The leper is an outcast.

“Command the children of Israel, that they *put out of the camp every leper*, and every one that hath an issue, and whosoever is defiled by the dead: both male and female shall ye put out, without the camp shall ye put them; *that they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof I dwell.*”⁵

The leper is made to live a solitary existence outside population centers because they “defile” or “dirty” those places where they live. Now, it is customary to think that quarantining lepers was the result of the fear of contagion and so an attempt to keep leprosy from spreading. It is likely true that they did not understand, as we do today, that leprosy was not easily communicated from one person to another. It required close, intimate, and extended contact with leprosy before it spread to another. But, *as far as the text is concerned*, the level of contagion that leprosy posed is neither here nor there. We cannot emphasize this too much: *The text does not mention the fear of human contagion as the reason for quarantining lepers.*

Or, perhaps, it would be better to say that the text does not mention concern over the possibility of lepers defiling other *humans*. Rather, the worry is that the leper defiles *God!* The leper is removed from “the camp,” not because humans lived there, but because God dwelt there: “that they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof *I dwell.*”

God promised to dwell in the midst of his people. But He could not dwell in the midst of “uncleanness.” If there was uncleanness in the camp, God would be offended and leave. Using the language of atonement as we understand it, God would disconnect. Disassociate Himself from Israel. He would not know at-onement with a leper or a people who gave admittance to a leper.

Consider, now, the following passage.

“And thou shalt have a paddle [shovel] upon thy weapon; and it shall be, when thou wilt ease thyself abroad [a Hebrew euphemism for your English euphemism ‘going to the bathroom,’ i.e., defecating] thou shalt dig therewith, and shalt turn back and cover that which cometh from thee: for the LORD thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp... therefore shall thy camp be holy: *that he see no unclean thing in thee, and turn away from thee.*”⁶

What, the reader may ask, does this passage have to do leprosy and lepers? God’s response to human poop is remarkably similar to His response to lepers! Both offend his senses and cause him to “turn away,” disconnect, and leave. Such Biblical assertions about God as those found above likely influenced the Book of Mormon’s conclusion that “the kingdom of God is not filthy, and there cannot any *unclean* thing enter into the kingdom of God.”⁷ What was true of the kingdom of God was true of the camp. God could not abide where uncleanness was present.

Now, one might wonder why an ailment such as leprosy, seemingly only physical, would trigger such a negative divine reaction. We must remember that leprosy, like many illnesses,⁸ was associated with sin and thought to be indicative of sin. For example, as a result of Aaron’s and Miriam’s sin,

“The anger of the LORD was kindled against them; and he departed. And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam,

⁵ Numbers 5.²⁻³, italics added.

⁶ Deuteronomy 23.¹³⁻¹⁴; emphasis added.

⁷ 1 Nephi 15.³⁴, italics added.

⁸ Many examples could be sighted. Consider just these two: Psalm 38.¹⁻⁷, and 1 Corinthians 11.²⁹⁻³⁰.

and, behold, she was leprous. And Aaron said unto Moses, ‘Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, *lay not the sin upon us*, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother’s womb.’”⁹

Leprosy was not only associated with sin. It was associated with death, both physical and spiritual.

To recap. Leprosy was indicative of sin. The leper was considered unclean and unholy. Because of uncleanness, the leper was made to live in solitude and outside populated areas. The leper’s removal from camps, villages, cities, synagogues, temples, etc., was the consequence of the fear that God would see the uncleanness and abandon the camps, villages, cities, synagogues, temples, etc. According to the Hebrew Bible, then, leprosy was a kind of anti-at-one-ment. Leprosy was thought to produce detachment from God rather than attachment, disconnection from God rather than connection.

All of this helps explain our shock that a man “full of leprosy” would approach Jesus. We are most assuredly justified in assuming that the man thought of Jesus as a man of God. Thus, he certainly must have considered it a strong possibility that Jesus would reject him and refuse, not only as any holy man would do, but as God would do, to be associated or connected with him in any way, shape, or form. The leper would certainly have known that on the off chance that Jesus should engage in any way with him, Jesus would, himself, become unclean and defiled. Once his engagement with the leper was discovered, Jesus, like the leper, would almost certainly have been excluded from synagogue and temple for at least twenty-four hours—and maybe longer, given that his engagement with the leper was not an accident, but was performed with such blatant disregard for accepted religious standards.

And yet, the leper approached Jesus. Why? How? Perhaps the leper’s approach speaks only of his desperation. But, I think, we can go further. Just as we are justified in assuming that the leper considered Jesus a holy man, we are justified in assuming that he must have considered it possible that the holy Jesus would not reject him, but receive and help him. He must have seen or heard something in Jesus that led him to think that Jesus might just be unorthodox and radical enough to ignore, flout, even, the Hebrew Bible’s prohibitions and the religious conventions of his day concerning engagement with a leper.

The leper was rewarded for his belief in both Jesus’ holiness and his radical unorthodoxy. Contrary to the Hebrew Bible’s assertions and the expectations of his day, Jesus, portraying and acting like God as he always did, put the lie to God’s detachment and disconnectedness with lepers. Like his Father, Jesus, was not offended by the leper and made no attempt to avoid him, disassociate or disconnect himself from him. He could not be defiled by puny, weak human uncleanness. Such human uncleanness was impotent in the face of divine power.

Yes, the leper was right to think that Jesus was a radically connected man. His life was one of connection and at-one-ment. As we will see in the following meditations, Jesus will reveal his own and his Father’s radical connectedness by quite literally attaching himself to the unclean and potentially defiling leper.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 21, 2024)

⁹ Numbers 12.⁹⁻¹², emphasis added.

¹²*When he was in a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy: who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean."

¹³And he put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, "I will: be thou clean."

And immediately the leprosy departed from him. ¹⁴And he charged him to tell no man: but go, and shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing, according as Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.

In this meditation, we continue our examination of Luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴ with its account of Jesus' encounter with a leper. This passage is an example of atonement as connectedness as found in Jesus' earthly ministry.

In our first meditation, we examined leprosy and the social and religious status of lepers as the Hebrew Bible understood them. According to the Hebrew Bible, the theology and culture of Jesus' day, and their view of God and His character, the unnamed leper that approached Jesus would have lived a life disconnected from God and man for however long the affliction had rested upon him. Contrary to our expectations, the Hebrew Bible stresses that the quarantining of lepers was less about the fear of physical contagion among mortals and more about the fear of offending and spiritually defiling both man and God, for leprosy was closely associated with sin.

Yet, even with this millennia-long tradition, the leper approached Jesus. This approach was the result of more than desperation. It was the result of the Leper's belief, acquired we know not how, that Jesus might be both holy and unorthodox enough that he would, against all tradition and religious convention and whatever public ridicule he might face, engage the leper.

Still, the leper's approach was tentative. The leper "fell on his face, and besought [Jesus], saying, 'Lord, if you want to, you have the power to cleanse me.'¹⁰"

Here, we wish to make a few observations about the leper's confession, "Lord, if you want to, you have the power to cleanse me." We call it a confession, for such it is. It is not presented in question form. The confession is such that we understand the nature and extent of the leper's "faith." By what means we do not know, but the leper came to believe that Jesus had the power to cleanse him. The belief in such a power is no trifle. Individuals had been suffering under the pains and stigma of leprosy as far back as history has recorded. Leprosy had been a stubborn foe of humanity that brought in its wake great societal and religious stigma.

While the leper seems to harbor little doubt about Jesus' *capability*, he did possess doubt about Jesus' *willingness* to cleanse: "If you want to..." And this is exactly where the rubber hits the road. What good is someone's capabilities if they refuse to use them out of a lack of desire? The leper seems to have considered the possibility that Jesus *could* cleanse him, but, for reasons we have already discussed, might not be *willing* to do so.

Our translation makes clear what the King James translation can, if the reader is not careful, obscure. The English "will" of the KJV is not to be confused with the English future "will" as in "shall." The English "will," as our translation makes clear, is the "will" of "desire," "inclination," "willingness," "wanting." Indeed, there is nothing of the future found in the leper's confession. The verb is present

¹⁰ Author's translation.

tense. The leper is looking for immediate cleansing in the present moment.

We should note, too, that the leper is looking for “cleansing,” not “healing.” Now, it is true that in the case of the leper the two are almost synonymous. But we should consider the possibility that the text reads “cleanse” rather than “heal” because the man’s suffering was predominantly emotional and spiritual rather than physical. He was less interested in having clear skin than in reconnecting with others, with society, and, especially, with God. In asking to be cleansed rather than healed, the leper demonstrates that his priorities are spiritual and focused on God and his relationship with Deity.

Jesus’ response to the leper’s confession was, “I do want to. Be clean.”

I don’t know of any bigger three-word affirmation than this: “I want to.” Jesus WANTED to cleanse the leper. He DESIRED to cleanse the man. This is a profound statement of character. It is a profound statement about the kind of being Jesus was and is and, through association, the kind of Being God is. Jesus and his Father WANT to be there for others. They wish to engage with others in ways that heal, cleanse, and advance.

This “wanting” to help and be there for others is indicative of connectedness, association, attachment, at-one-ment. But, this connected wanting is only one indication of Jesus’ at-one-ment with the leper. Just as powerful is the manner in which Jesus expressed his “wanting” and “willingness.” That will be the subject of our next meditation.

But, before moving on to our next meditation, we want to conclude with one last thought. Like the leper, we often believe and boldly proclaim our belief in Jesus’ power to do good and positively affect those into whose lives he enters and acts. But this is only half the truth. At the same time that we believe in his capabilities, we are often unsure of his desires and whether he wants to enter our lives, messy as they are, and act. John Calvin, one of the great discerners of the workings of the religious mind, put it like this.

“There are very many who so conceive God’s mercy that they receive almost no consolation from it. They are constrained with miserable anxiety at the same time as they are in doubt whether he will be merciful to them because they confine that very kindness of which they seem utterly persuaded within too narrow limits. For among themselves they ponder that it is indeed great and abundant, shed upon many, available and ready for all; but that it is uncertain whether it will even come to them.... This reasoning, when it stops in mid-course, is only half. Therefore, it does not so much strengthen the spirit in secure tranquility as trouble it with uneasy doubting. But there is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith....

“There is no right faith except when we dare with tranquil hearts to stand in God’s sight. This boldness arises only out of a sure confidence in divine benevolence and salvation.

“Here, indeed, is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather that we make them ours by inwardly embracing them. Hence, at last is born that confidence which Paul elsewhere calls ‘peace’... Now it is an assurance that renders the conscience calm and peaceful before God’s judgment. Without it the conscience must be harried by disturbed alarm, and almost torn to pieces.”¹¹

The leper reminds us that Jesus is more than capable and that his capabilities know no bounds. But he also WANTS desperately to use them for our benefit. It is not so much his capabilities that ties him to us,

¹¹ (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I, Book III, p. 561).

drives him to be connected and unified with us. It is his *wanting* that most powerfully testifies to his connectedness, his at-one-ment with us.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 21, 2024)

¹²*When he was in a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy: who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.”

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In our second meditation, we saw that in spite of this millennia-long tradition, “a man full of leprosy” approached Jesus. This approach was the result of more than desperation. It was the result of the leper’s belief, acquired we know not how, that Jesus might be both holy and unorthodox enough that he would, against all tradition and religious convention and whatever public ridicule he might face, engage the leper. While the leper was not certain of Jesus’ willingness, he seems to have had some degree of certainty about Jesus’ capacity to cleanse him: He “fell on his face, and besought [Jesus], saying, ‘Lord, if you want to, you have the power to cleanse me.’”¹²”

Jesus responded, “I do want to.”

Now, we must have a closer look at exactly how Jesus cleansed the leper. His manner of cleansing serves as an example of Jesus’ connectedness with the leper—the at-one-ment between Jesus and leper. Jesus, we are informed, “put forth his hand, and touched him.” We first consider the word, “touched.”

The King James’ “touch” does not begin to describe the level of engagement and connection—at-one-ment—that Jesus formed with the leper. It is not intimate enough. It is not sustained enough. It is not committed enough. It is not faithful enough.

We translate, “He extended his hand and *laid hold* of him.’ The Greek word that the King James Bible translates “touch” and that we translate as “lay hold of” is *apto*. It means “to fasten onto,” “to engage,” “to take part in,” “to join,” “to set upon.” This word describes, for example, the “touching” that goes on between two wrestlers. It also describes the “touching” that goes on between a loving husband and wife during sexual intimacy. Both circumstances involve a considerable degree of “touching.”

When we envision Jesus touching the leper, we should not envision a quick poke with the finger, a brief hand to the shoulder, or even the momentary laying of a hand on the leper’s head. No! We should

¹² Author’s translation.

envision an embrace—an extended embrace that no one present could possibly have missed. This “touch” speaks volumes. It speaks volumes about Jesus’ character, Jesus’ revelation about God, and Jesus’ revelation of God’s at-one-ment.

Obviously, to touch and, more, embrace someone is to form a literal and physical connection with and to them. For however long a touch lasts, a touch literally connects two people. They are attached, linked together. Through a touch, they become one mass—indeed, with Jesus hugging the leper, gravity would work on them as if they were one. It is entirely consistent with the meaning of the word to say that they are in a state of at-one-ment. By physically touching the leper, Jesus was, for as long as the embrace lasted, physically connected to, attached to, linked and at-one with the leper. Jesus’ act of touching the leper is as much an act of atonement as any act in which Jesus ever engaged.

There is no telling how long it had been since the leper had experienced a loving human touch. But the engagement, the connectedness, the at-one-ment of Jesus’ touch went well beyond the physical. As Jesus physically laid hold of the leper, he also became one with him emotionally and spiritually. Jesus took part in and became one with the leper, his sickness, and the attending uncleanness, suffering, guilt, and self-doubt. Jesus set upon his leprosy, seized it, and removed it. There was a kind of physical and emotional transference, as it were, of the man’s leprosy and un-holiness to Jesus.

So Jesus’ physical touching of the leper carried emotional and spiritual meaning. Jesus’ physical touching of the leper is symbolic of atonement. The connection, the linking of Jesus and the leper that Jesus’ touch was at-one-ment. In so uniting with the leper, Jesus touch put the lie to the millennia long claims that God was offended by uncleanness and could have no association, no connection, no attachment, no atonement with uncleanness. Jesus’ touch of an unclean man revealed God’s eternal and enduring connection to even the least among us.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 21, 2024)