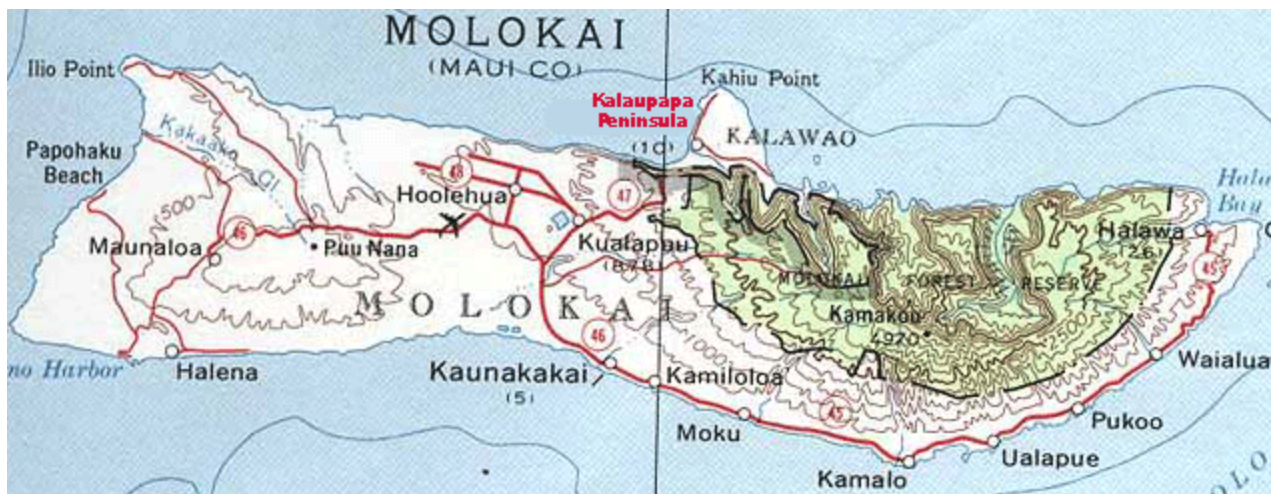


"My fellow lepers"

In June 1873, Father Damien*, a Belgian missionary to Hawaii, went to the remote Kalaupapa Peninsula on the northern shore of the island of Molokai. He did so knowing he could never leave. The Kalaupapa Peninsula is isolated from the rest of the island by a 2,000-foot cliff and surrounded on three sides by shark-infested waters, but it is not the imposing physical barriers that imprisoned Father Damien. Motivated by fear of an ancient disease led the Hawaiian government to quarantine the residents. The Kalaupapa Peninsula was a leper colony. During the first 12 years of his time there, Father Damien began each Sunday worship with "My fellow believers" but when he contracted leprosy himself, he began the following Sunday and each Sunday for the remaining four years of his life with "My fellow lepers."



The Kalaupapa Peninsula



Today, the Kalaupapa Peninsula is no longer off-limits, but most of the lepers still there in 1969, when the restriction was lifted, remain. You can visit the Peninsula, but only accompanied by a guide from Damien Tours.

In this issue of *Ekklesia Then & Now*, we'll take a look at biblical and human attitudes toward leprosy and examine how the lessons of Leviticus 13 reveal a deeper truth.

Contagious skin diseases threatened not only the infected individual but also entire towns or even the entire nation of Israel. The Hebrew term, *tsaraath*, referred not only to what we today call Hansen's Disease, but also to a wide variety of skin conditions. Leviticus 13, the portion of the Law dealing with leprosy, in fact, mentions a number of other skin conditions, including boils, burns, and eczema. The primary purpose of Leviticus 13 was to set down careful, deliberate steps in the diagnosis of skin diseases to ensure (1) that those with benign conditions were not incorrectly labeled and (2) the protection of the community from spread.

People with suspicious marks on the skin were to be brought to a priest for examination. The priest looked for three characteristics: white hair, depth beneath the skin, and raw flesh (Leviticus 13:3, 10). If these were present, the priest was to isolate the victim for seven days and then re-examine the victim. If the infection had not spread, the priest was to declare the person clean, but if it had spread, the leper's sentence was profound:

"As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." (Leviticus 13:45-46)

But when the disease ran its course and passed the contagious stage, as evidenced by white skin, the leper could again be considered clean:

"If the leprosy breaks out farther on the skin, and the leprosy covers all the skin of him who has the infection from his head even to his feet, as far as the priest can see, then the priest shall look, and behold, if the leprosy has covered all his body, he shall pronounce clean him who has the infection; it has all turned white and he is clean" (Leviticus 13:12-13).

Lepers played a prominent role in the life and ministry of Jesus. Immediately after the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus heals a leper who displays faith in Jesus (Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-15). In accordance with Mosaic Law, Jesus instructs the man to present himself to the priest but not to tell anyone else. Predictably, the grateful former leper spreads the news and Jesus is besieged by crowds. Jesus' willingness to touch this leper defied social and religious taboo and demonstrated his preference for people over custom.

In sending out the Twelve, Jesus gives them authority to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (Matthew 10:5-8).

One of the most well-known incidents in the New Testament is the unnamed woman anointing Jesus with expensive perfume. In response to His disciples' complaints, Jesus says "wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her." This profoundly significant event, just prior to Jesus' crucifixion, occurs at the home of Simon the Leper (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9). That Jesus was in Simon's home again demonstrates his

compassion. Religious tradition prohibited people from even entering the home of a leper.

Finally, Luke reports the time Jesus sent ten lepers to the priests. All of them were cleansed as they went but only one, a Samaritan, returned to express his gratitude to Jesus. "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well," Jesus tells this Samaritan, a cleansing that undoubtedly went well beyond curing the disease (Luke 17:11-19)

The writers of the pre-Nicene church made repeated references to Jesus' cleansing of lepers and clearly understood the correlation between leprosy and sin:

"For as we are lepers in sin, we are made clean, by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord, from our old transgressions; being spiritually regenerated as new-born babes..." (Irenaeus, Fragments of Lost Writings, ca 195)

Clement of Alexandria related Leviticus 13:12-13 (the declaration of cleanliness when the leper's skin turns entirely white) to proper clothing for the regenerate Christian (ca 210):

"(A)s in the case of the soldier, the sailor, and the ruler, so also the proper dress of the temperate man is what is plain, becoming, and clean. Whence also in the law, the law enacted by Moses about leprosy rejects what has many colours and spots, like the various scales of the snake. He therefore wishes man, no longer decking himself gaudily in a variety of colours, but white all over from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot, to be clean..." (Clement of Alexandria, Paedagogus III.11)

If anything, public attitudes towards lepers worsened as time went on. In the Middle Ages, lepers were required to warn others with a bell or wooden clapper. Failure to comply could lead to a death sentence. The church had an inconsistent attitude toward lepers. On the one hand, it performed an official "Mass of Separation" (originated in the 13th century) for lepers:



"I forbid you to ever enter a church, a monastery, a fair, a mill, a market or an assembly of people. I forbid you to leave your house unless dressed in your recognizable garb and also shod. I forbid you to wash your hands or to launder anything or to drink at any stream or fountain, unless using your own barrel or dipper. I forbid you to touch anything you buy or barter for, until it becomes your own. I forbid you to enter any tavern; and if you wish for wine, whether you buy it or it is given to you, have it funneled into your keg. I forbid you to share house with any woman but your wife. I command you, if accosted by anyone while traveling on a road, to set yourself down-wind of them before you answer. I forbid you to enter any narrow passage, lest a passerby bump into you. I forbid you, wherever you go, to touch the rim or the rope of a well without donning your gloves. I forbid you to touch any child or give them anything. I forbid you to drink or eat from any vessel but your own."

----Martene's *De Antiquis Ecclesiae Ritibus*, "Ordo I", qtd. in Martinus Cawley, "The Life of Alice the Leper and the Silver Age of Villers," *Cistercian Scholars Quarterly*

At the same time, the church displayed considerable compassion towards lepers, founding leper hospitals, the first of which was probably established by Basil the Great in about 370. In the Middle Ages, when the crusades greatly exacerbated the incidence of leprosy, the Order of St. Lazarus emerged and established numerous Lazaries (leper houses) in Europe. Yet public attitudes toward leprosy remained largely ignorant, particularly its contagiousness, until well into the 20th century.

Now

In 1991, The World Health Organization (WHO) also established a goal of reducing global incidence of leprosy (Hansen's Disease) to less than one case per 10,000. Into the mid-eighties, leprosy cases maintained a consistent level of 10-12 million, but by 2003, the WHO goal had been reached in all regions except southeast Asia thanks to the introduction of multidrug therapy (MDT). There are an estimated 625,000 uncured cases worldwide today. In the United States, leprosy is virtually unknown, with fewer than 7000 registered cases and 300 new cases per year (Source: [Encarta](#)).

Despite this, the term "leper" remains active in our vocabulary, a vestige of this frightening disease and the social stigma it carried. While the first definition of "leper" in the [Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary](#) is "a person affected with leprosy," the second is "a person shunned for moral or social reasons." Like ancient and medieval victims of Hansen's Disease, today's lepers often did nothing to deserve their status as outcasts. Too often, within the church, there are those who are considered lepers to the Christian community.



Since I went broke, people seem to avoid me, as if I have an infectious disease... Am I overreacting, Susan? Susan??!

Primary among these is certainly AIDS victims, who are saddled with the same kind of ignorant attitudes true lepers often were. Some may argue that homosexuals who contract AIDS deserve it--I have even heard it argued that their disease is a direct punishment from God. Regardless of whether AIDS victims contracted the disease from a tainted blood supply, from birth to an infected mother, or from homosexual behavior, they are still people who God loves and who are in need of His love.

Besides AIDS victims, there are others who are often treated as lepers in the church — the mentally ill, the poor, the grossly obese, and even the profoundly unattractive come to mind. When our churches become conclaves of well-dressed people with good jobs and seemingly respectable homes, we may damage our ability to perform our primary function — bringing the Good News to the world.

The important truth we often miss is that we are **all** lepers! The lesson of Leviticus 13 goes beyond skin diseases and extends to more profound spiritual diseases.

Recently in our congregation, some 40 men gathered for a two-day retreat focused on confession. Using every man, God's man** (Stephen Arterburn and Kenny Luck with Mike Yorkey, 2003: Waterbrook Press, Colorado Springs, CO), we studied the sins that plague men, discussed them in large and small groups, and committed to forming intimate groups of brothers.

The biblical prescription for dealing with leprosy applies equally to dealing with the sin that infects every person on the planet. It must have been exceedingly difficult for a person with a suspicious spot on the skin to show it to a priest since he or she faced the complete loss of family and friends if the diagnosis was leprosy. "Maybe I can cover it up and no one will notice, or it will just go away," many must have thought. But the Law was unequivocal and the consequences of disobedience could be dire for the community.

How many of us have the same thought about our sin--maybe no one will notice, maybe it will go away? But the consequences of such thinking are even more serious than hiding skin lesions. The contagiousness of leprosy has never been medically established, but the contagiousness of sin is obvious. That's why confession is so important, and the process described in Leviticus 13, combined with the concepts of Christian relationships, is God's ideal model.

For the Levitical model to work well in examining sin, it is important that we develop close relationships in which trust is absolute. Jesus modeled the relationship circles that should characterize the church—loving relationships with everyone in our community, but also the kind of even closer friendships Jesus had with Peter, James, and John. Under the Old Covenant, God established a special priesthood to serve as intermediaries between Himself and the common man, but when Jesus was established as the permanent High Priest (see the *Letter to the Hebrews*), the wall between God and mankind was destroyed, as symbolized by the tearing of the veil of the Temple (Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45). In Christianity, there is no other intermediary, and we each serve as priest (1 Peter 2:9).

As Christians, we each have the profound responsibility to reveal our spiritual spots to a trusted priest (fellow believer). Those to whom we confess carry the same duty to perform a careful examination that Levitical priests did. Some behaviors are superficial, prompted by a temporary mood that does not represent a deadly disease. But others are deeper with the raw flesh Paul described to the churches of Galatia:

"Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these" (Galatians 5:19-21a). This spiritual leprosy is dangerous, Paul says, since "those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:21b).

Paul recognized how devastating unrepentant sin could be to both the individual and the community. This is why he told the Corinthians to expel the man who was sleeping with his father's wife. *"Remove the wicked man from among yourselves,"* he advised (1 Corinthians 5:13b) and do not *"associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—(do) not even to eat with such a one"* (1 Corinthians 5:11). His hope in his prescription was both to protect the church and so that the man might recognize his condition and return to the Lord.

The most serious symptom of leprosy was a spreading of the infection, and it is certainly the same with sin. In advising the church in Corinth, Paul observed that "*a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough*" (1 Corinthians 5:6). Many of us have probably seen the results of bitterness or dissension in a church. It affects everyone and virtually destroys the effectiveness of the group. Ultimately, it was a spread of pride within the Corinthian church that most concerned Paul: "*You are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?*" (1 Corinthians 5:2)

Leprosy is a disease that eats the body, and sin is a disease that eats the soul. So, like Father Damien, we should all address each other as "My fellow lepers" and confess our sins to one another so that we can be truly cleansed by the blood of Christ.

Discussion

I received several notes addressed to "My Fellow Leper" after the last issue.

My friend DeWayne from Colorado sent this note:

Thanks, Dick, for the thought provoking comments. Leprosy / Sin relationship was a worthwhile comparison. When the "leprosy" is gone, the individual is "whole again" and free. That can have many applications that would make our "church life" more supportive and up-building. Forgiveness becomes blindness to the past.

DS: DeWayne's note reminded me that I may not have been clear about an important fact: like the clean lepers of Leviticus 13:12-13, the spiritual leprosy of those who accept the lordship of Christ Jesus is washed clean by His blood.



* The story of Father Damien is told in more detail by the Christian History Institute: <http://chi.gospelcom.net/DAILYF/2001/05/daily-05-04-2001.shtml>

** Available in the [Peculiar Press bookstore](#).

Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Roles and Titles (April 19)

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