

In Haro Strait, across from Vancouver Island's Saanich Peninsula is Darcy Island. The island's infamous legacy began when Victoria's police and health officers conducted one of their routine sweeps through Chinatown in 1891. Hidden in a small shack behind a store on Fisgard Street, officials found five huddled men bearing obvious signs of leprosy. Victoria's municipal government responded by quickly gaining provincial support to expropriate D'Arcy Island and turn it into a leper colony. For the next 33 years the tiny island was used to isolate and segregate lepers from society. A supply ship came once every three months. Since leprosy could not be cured and there was danger of the disease contaminating other inhabitants of Victoria, it seemed acceptable to do what was done in Jesus' day ... shut the lepers away from society because of their uncleanness.

Sickness is no respecter of social status. Naaman, the Syrian military officer, has a good life but he has contracted a skin condition, which is translated as leprosy. Who knows where there is divine help to cleanse Naaman? A little captive girl does. She says, "The prophet who is in Samaria has the power to cleanse you." God uses a small child to give a sacred message. Naaman makes the journey with permission from his king; he brings gifts for Israel's king, since Samaria is a district under the Israelite king's rule. Elisha hears of Naaman's need and said, "Let him come now to me, that he might know that there is a prophet in Israel." Elisha sends his servant to direct Naaman to bathe in the Jordan. Naaman is outraged someone of his status is casually dealt with. He gets the Walk-In Clinic rather than a personal family doctor. His servants reason with him that he should take what is offered. As instructed, Naaman reluctantly bathes in the Jordan River, located in a foreign land. This cleansing ritual results in his healing and salvation (wholeness). We almost have the impression that Naaman would have preferred that the treatment didn't work, because he found it so humbling.

Our Gospel story from Mark also tells of a man plagued by leprosy. Leprosy in biblical times was a term that covered any skin disorder. This incurable condition was regarded as a living death in which the person was shunned from society. The leper was banished from the fellowship of humankind, was required to wear torn clothing, a bare head, a covering upon his or her upper lip, and they must cry as they moved through a community, "Unclean!" The leper asks Jesus to make a choice. Whether our cleansing includes physical healing is understood as Jesus' choice. The leper understands this. Naaman who was cured of his leprosy almost missed his cleansing because what he was asked to do was beneath him. The high point of the text occurs when Jesus reaches out and touches the leper. Either they will both be unclean or a miracle will occur. Which is the greater miracle? Jesus healing a man of leprosy or Jesus reaching out and touching him before he was healed? Both occurred. Sometimes un-wellness is a matter of perspective. Others may decide that we are lepers in need of healing, when we are simply being ourselves. And sometimes our condition is simply that we are aging, although the cosmetic industry might have us believe that aging is a leprosy condition that needs to be healed.

Consider the following: after a spring break, a teacher asked her young pupils how they spent the holidays. One child wrote this response: "We always used to spend the holidays with Grandma and Grandpa. They used to live here in a big brick house, but Grandpa got retarded and they moved to Arizona. Now they live in a place with a lot of other retarded people. They go to a building called a wrecked center, but they must have got it fixed, because it is all right now. They play games and do exercises there, but they don't do them very well. My Grandma used to bake cookies and stuff, but I guess she forgot how. Nobody there cooks, they just eat out. And they eat the same thing every night, 'Early Birds'. Some of the people can't get past the man in the dollhouse to go out. So the ones who do get out bring food back to the wrecked center and call it potluck. Sunshine & Rainbows – Maureen.”

From a child's perspective, perhaps retirement is something that needs "healing". On a more tragic level, there are actually things like chronic drug addiction, terminal disease, impoverishing mental illness, soul-destroying poverty. Some people make recoveries and others are consumed by their 'leprosy'. We cannot pretend to know why some are healed and some are not. In either case, our wholeness involves a restored relationship with God.

Being called to wholeness can be a fearsome thing if we are anxious about the consequences of being whole. People with addictions or personality disorders who start to get better, sometimes encounter great hostility from family and friends who want them to stay as they are. Becoming whole can destabilize a whole network of relationships and challenge people. Our gospel story is about one individual becoming whole and restoring relationship with the community.

Perhaps the story also applies to churches. What would it mean for churches to shed their leprosy and risk restored relationships with the community? Our leprosy might be the legacy of residential schools, or a declining membership as people seek their spiritual wholeness elsewhere. Part of our decline is an unwillingness or an inability to have whole relationships with the wider community. Our empty pews are a symptom of changes in society but also a symptom of our relationship with society. Healing for those wounded by crime involves restoring wholeness to individuals and their relationships with the community. When Jesus healed the lepers, he healed their relationship with the community as well as healing the leprosy itself.

Jesus performed the intimate action of restoring wholeness to people by restoring them to society, whether healing the leper or sitting at the same table with tax collectors or forgiving the woman caught in adultery by a judgmental mob. We too seek wholeness, even if we are not yet fully aware of what such wholeness will mean. Answering God's call to wholeness may mean that we do something as simple and profound as Naaman bathing in the Jordan River. Or answering God's call may involve renouncing some of the core things that we believe to be essential to our identity. Jesus Christ is a liberator who embodies the wholeness that God would so freely give us. Let us believe and let us be whole. Amen.