

I read a fascinating article years ago, on popularity among Junior High School students. (Remember Junior High? – for me, one of the most difficult times of my life.) It should come as no surprise that being popular, fitting in with your peers, was the most important concern in the lives of 7th and 8th graders. In the article, a survey asked Junior High students who they thought were the most popular boys and most popular girls in their school, and whether the student believed he or she was popular.

What the survey found was that there was a general consensus among the students about who were the most popular boys and most popular girls. Interestingly, the popular girls and popular boys, the ones everyone agreed were popular, did not include themselves in the list of popular students. It would seem that part of the frustration of being in your early teens is the universally held belief that fitting in with your peers is the most important thing in life, and that *I'm just not making it*.

The saddest news, speaking for myself now, not the survey, is that the fear of not fitting in is seldom completely outgrown. All those Junior High School boys and girls grow up, go to High School then college, get jobs, get married, join clubs and organizations, have children, make money, even go on to great things – and still, they fret because they feel like they just don't fit in.

In reading *Team of Rivals* by Doris Kearns Goodwin, I learned that Abraham Lincoln put together his cabinet and chief advisors with people who had opposed him in his run up to the Presidency. Goodwin writes about what a remarkable politician, statesman, administrator, and overall great leader Lincoln was. Yet, Lincoln was always self-conscious about his lack of formal education. This arguably greatest of presidents never felt like he “fit in” with those highly educated senators and cabinet officers.

Today's Old Testament and Gospel introduce us to the consummate outsider. If there is one person who never fits in anywhere – synonymous with unpopular – it would be the Leper. Naaman could be a metaphor for everyman (or woman) who has just about everything -- everything but that feeling of acceptance.

Naaman is successful in his career: he is Commander of the army. Naaman is skilled in what he does: he is, we are told, a mighty warrior. Naaman's work is recognized. He's not a struggling genius like Van Gogh who was great but unrecognized. We are told that Naaman is “in high favor with his master.” Naaman has even had time to settle down with a happy wife. We know she is happy; she has a servant. Yet, Naaman was a leper.

Despite everything Naaman achieved or ever would achieve, there was something in his life that would keep him from fitting in – Naaman was a leper.

In today's Gospel we heard about Jesus, “A leper came to him.” Even in the context of the rest of the chapter, this appearance of a leper is somewhat sudden and startling... “A leper came to him.”

From what we know of Jewish custom of the first century, it is unlikely that this meeting between Jesus and a leper occurred in downtown Capernum or downtown Nazareth, or downtown Jerusalem, or any town or city in Gallilee or Judea. We know this because lepers were banished from Jewish society. Lepers or anyone having any contact with lepers became ritually unclean. Unlike Naaman, whose leprosy interfered with an otherwise successful life, this unnamed leper in the Gospel was considered dead to his society.

I look at this congregation and I know with certainty that all of you either now or at some time in the past, shared the outlook of the leper. I know this with certainty because I know that all of you have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). The temptation to sin comes in many forms, but temptation to sin always contains in large measure the promise that the sin is the permit to enter a world where the sinner will fit in. So the sinner will lie, steal, commit acts of violence, commit acts of adultery, will break any commandment, in an attempt to move from the place the sinner is – a place of alienation – to a place of acceptance by the world.

Most, if not every sin, is a futile act by the sinner to fit in. Some, like Naaman, have the world on a string – they are rich, powerful, settled in a family, respected by the people who count. And yet, that

feeling of not fitting in - that spiritual leprosy – will make rich men steal, will make powerful women tell petty lies, will make influential people engage in illicit sex to raise their self-esteem. Men and women who have just about everything anybody could want will fall into sin for the empty hope of being accepted by those who keep them out.

Then, there are those who, like the nameless leper confronting Jesus, feel they are already dead to the world. Sadly, there are those who feel so out of place in this life, that sin and self-destruction are a way of life. The most obvious examples of this spiritual leprosy are the criminal addict or the skid row alcoholic; those persons who feel there is no place for them in society and can never be one. Their self-destruction in their addiction is, in their opinion, all they deserve. Preying on us, with crimes against the society that rejected them, is exactly what we deserve, in their opinion. Perverse as it may sound, they fit in by playing a role that society has given them to play.

There is no news in all of what I have been saying the last few minutes. You may not have phrased it in just the same way, but you all have known that feeling of fear of not fitting in. You all have tried in one way or another to do something about it on your own. That is, you all have sinned.

Happily, God has revealed to us that God can cure the leper. Nothing in Aram – not its armies, its wealth, its religion – can save Naaman. To cure his leprosy, the leper must turn to the Man of God, the prophet of Israel. Only the one true God, the one revealed in Holy Scripture, the God of Elisha, has the power to do for Naaman what he desires.

And the nameless leper of the Gospel – what about him? Pay attention to how this story unfolds. Jesus chooses (I prefer the RSV translation, “Jesus wills” to the NRSV “Jesus chooses”) to make the leper clean. It is God’s will that you see yourself as the beloved of God. You are clean. You are whole. Jesus touches the leper. Normally, the unclean defiles the clean. But Jesus’ touch has the power to cleanse the unclean. In Jesus’ time, cleansing a leper is tantamount to raising the dead.

Most importantly, see this cleansing by Jesus of the Leper as a costly act of love. The Evangelist Mark writes about Jesus’ instruction to the leper: “After

sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone.” The Greek words “sternly warning” can be translated, “snorted like a horse.” Jesus was visibly adamant because he knew what would happen as these things became widely known.

In the short term, Jesus wound up trading places with the leper. The leper went into the City, Jerusalem, to offer a sacrifice for his cleansing. On the way he “proclaimed freely” what Jesus had done for him. As a consequence, the ex-leper, who was once forbidden to come near people, is in the city. Jesus is now forced out into the country where the leper had been forced to stay.

In the long run, Jesus’ fame would spread until his popularity and teaching bring him into confrontations with the religious leaders. Jesus’ “stern warning” grew out of his human anxiety about what he had to know was coming. Yet, his love for the leper willed him to be cleansed.

Jesus loves you no less.

The bad news of not fitting in is all too well known. The good news that Jesus has what you need to be all the person you want to be. That good news may be, well... news! You may not have known that all the rest of us feel the same way. See, you are already starting to fit in. You may not know that Jesus chooses to make you clean just like he made us clean. More fitting in. You may not know that once you have Jesus in your heart, what you were before does not matter to the rest of us who have Jesus in our hearts. We were once all lepers; we are now all in Christ, the most “fit in” thing of all. When God is your Father, I am your brother. We are the body of Christ.

Amen.

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