

## *The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany*

In our news lately we have heard of the devastating fires that are engulfing the country of Australia. At last count, more than 200 people have died and countless wildlife have perished in what is now believed to have been started by arson. I read of one account where a group of people sought shelter in a stadium as 100 foot walls of fire surrounded and blazed all around them. They ran from one corner to another as the wind whipped the blaze and sparks flew from one spot to the next. Miraculously they survived. In Wednesday's paper, a picture depicts a chance encounter. A firefighter is offering a bottle of water to an injured koala. The story reads; Firefighter David Tree noticed the koala moving gingerly on scorched paws as his fire patrol passed. Clearly in pain, the animal stopped when it saw the firefighter. "It was amazing, he turned around, sat on his bum and sort of looked at me. I yelled for a bottle of water, unscrewed the top, tipped it up on his lips and he just took it naturally. He kept reaching for the bottle, almost like a baby." Apparently koala are rather a grumpy creature with a loud growl. They rarely come down from trees and don't like walking. But the firefighter was moved to pity and approached the animal. The picture in the paper shows a tender scene of the koala and the firefighter actually holding hands/paws.

An unlikely encounter. We heard of an unlikely encounter in our gospel story for today. Jesus is approached by a leper, an outcast, who begs for healing. In Jesus' time, the word leprosy was a sentence of isolation, fear and painful, prolonged death. There are still cases in the world today and the disease now can be treated, but untreated it can lead to blindness and disfigurement. Initially damage is confined to the nerves of the skin and muscle. As the disease progresses, nerves swell and become tender, hands, feet and facial skin eventually become numb and paralyzed. Muscle paralysis can lead to further deformity. Damage to the facial nerves means the eyelids cannot be closed; the cornea dries and ulcerates, leading to blindness. Cartilage and bone in the nose are often eroded and bones elsewhere in the body may be destroyed. Not a pretty picture in the least. We do not know what stage the leper who approaches Jesus is in, but we can just imagine what he may have looked like. He begs Jesus, if you choose, you can make me well. And Jesus does choose.

We would expect nothing less from Jesus, would we? Of course Jesus would heal him. After all, that is what he said in our previous gospel readings, that is what I have come to do, to heal the sick, to proclaim the good news. But least we forget, we too are called to 'heal the sick and proclaim the kingdom of God.'

This can get messy. If you have spent anytime in a hospital, you know that sickness is not pretty, it smells. If you have spent any time in a nursing home, there can be unpleasant odors, odors of people not able to fully care for themselves. If you have spent any time around a homeless person, it can be stinky. Not having access to water and soap on a regular basis or a washing machine for clothes leaves us with dirty, unwashed bodies, perspiration, sweat. Do we dare to touch such a person? Do we dare to extend a hand in welcome, let alone friendship? Jesus touches the leper, a non-person. Jesus enters into the pain and brokenness of human existence, even at great risk to himself. Jesus fully embraces the lost, broken, and outcasts as the ultimate revelation of God's love.

As Christians, we too, can touch the untouchables. We do not have the power to cure the sick in the sense that we can make the disease disappear or perform miracles. But we do have power. We have power to enter into the pain and suffering with our fellow human beings, to join them and journey with them in their fear and isolation. We can bring peace into chaos, restoration into strife, offer community to dispel isolation. There can be nothing more healing than to be surrounded by love, faith and prayer.

What are ways we can make these encounters happen? Volunteer at the Samaritan Center. At Van Duyn Home and Hospital every week I have volunteers from area churches who transport the residents to the Sunday afternoon service. But I have several Sundays open. Could St. Paul's become involved? Could you help transport, could you visit with the residents? Could you offer the gift of music? Any joy you could share would be a blessing to the residents. Are there any among us who are in pain, physically or spiritually, who we could give our time to? We don't need to look far out our doors to see the hard lives some people must live, the poverty, the anxiety, the fear gripping our brothers and sisters.

Unlikely encounters. Unlikely encounters where we take a risk. Risk perhaps of being bitten by a hurt koala, risks of being the focus of someone's anger at the world treating them unfairly, risks of being involved in pain which is not ours in the first place. Humanity is crying out, you can choose, you can make me clean! Do we choose?

Amen

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