

Episcopal Church of the Resurrection  
Centerville, Utah

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YEAR B, EPIPHANY 06 (RCL)  
2 Kings 5:1-14, Psalm 30, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Mark 1:40-45

Preparing a sermon is always a journey. And sometimes it takes you to places you would never imagine. For better or worse, I am going to take you along for part of my journey for this week. Please make sure that you are firmly in your seat, and keep your hands and arms inside the pews until the sermon has come to a full and complete stop.

Do any of you know who James Carville is? He is a well-known political consultant, a commentator, media personality and pundit. Do you know where he was born and raised? James Carville was born and raised in Carville, Louisiana. The town was named after his grandfather, who was the postmaster in Carville. Carville is tucked away in a bend on the Mississippi River, on a quiet two-lane country road. There, hidden in the elbow of the river, stands a white-columned plantation house. Guarding the house are two gigantic oak trees, shrouded in Spanish moss. This particular place, is a place where fever, fear and shame intersected for more than 100 years. It is a place occupied by ghosts. Ghosts of people brought there in handcuffs, to live out the rest of their days. People who were known only by an alias, to protect their families from being shunned and ostracized. People brought there to live behind a barbed wire fence. This was a place where women were denied their babies, and often

even the chance to become mothers. This place, known as Carville, was the only leprosarium in the continental United States. More than 1500 “patients” called Carville home since the first seven inmates were carried to its damp slave huts one dark night in 1894. There was a range of reactions by its final residents when Carville was closed in 1998. One Mrs. Pendleton was anxious to be released, to live free for what years she had left. She was first diagnosed with leprosy at age 5, with a numb spot on her leg. Untreated for nine years, she was kidnapped at age 14 by public health officials and brought to Carville, “robbing her of the best years of her life”. Johnny Harmon, at age 86, was afraid to leave his tiny apartment, it’s walls covered with his oil paintings. His most vivid memory is that despite his pleas, his diagnosis of leprosy in 1935 was the headline in his hometown newspaper: “Local Health Official Discovers Case of Leprosy in Highway Department.”

Leprosy (known now as Hansen’s Disease), has been readily curable with sulfa drugs since the 1940’s, and has been almost entirely eradicated from the planet. It is interesting to know, that it is nearly non-contagious, despite long held beliefs to the contrary. 95% of the population is not susceptible to the disease. And even in Carville, there is no record of any doctor or worker there ever contracting the disease from a patient/inmate. That includes folks such as Sister Francis de Sayles Provancher, a Daughter of Charity nun who cared for those at Carville since 1942. Sister Francis bristles at the Biblical notion of leprosy as “being unclean”. She goes on to say that the Bible is wrong on that count, and

should be rewritten.

Be that as it may, leprosy is most notable for how those afflicted are isolated, excluded and banished. It was that way long before the time of Jesus, and to this day, most states still have laws mandating quarantines. In addition to their disease, lepers perhaps suffered more from their isolated lives in forced exile.

The term leprosy was broadly and imprecisely used in Jesus' time to describe any manner of skin problems. There is no way to know now what this man in today's gospel actually suffered from. But whatever his true physical ailment, labeled as a leper he would be banished as one. In today's gospel, the leper somehow knows, and tells Jesus, that he has the power to cure him. Jesus responds in a shocking manner, by reaching out and touching the leper. Jesus tells the man that he does choose to heal him, and does so. With a touch and a word, the diseased man is healed, and the outcast can again rejoin family, friends and society.

We can sometimes forget the distinction between being cured and being healed. Cures fix the immediate problem. But healing is in the restoration to a full human life. In today's gospel, Jesus did cure the man's leprosy. But more importantly, the man was healed, to be able to live in fullness of life with God, and with humanity. As people of faith, this distinction between sickness and broken-ness, and between cures and healing is incredibly important.

If we think about it, we can see and know the difference. Many people get

sick, and then are cured. But they may nonetheless live in broken-ness, never finding the wholeness of life with God that is possible. Conversely, some people never recover from sickness, injuries or disease. But they on the other hand, live wholesome lives, often lives of joy and inspiration, afflicted as they may be. This distinction is critical for people of faith. We believe in an almighty God, who created all that there is, and when he was done, declared that it was all good. It grieves our hearts and our souls, and it tries our faith, when we see the suffering in the world. When we pray to God for the miracles and cures that do not come. It is hard to understand, and harder to accept, the seeming ambivalence of a loving and all-powerful God, deaf to our pleas during the agony of our most sorrowful suffering. One fact that we encounter early and often in life, is that not everyone is cured. Life is not fair. Nor is sickness, health or death. The good and Godly, suffer and die right along with the bad and the evil. And prayer doesn't seem to increase the odds at all.

But if we look at healing – the restoration of a life to wholeness with God, and to a bold, full participation in our lives, we find something quite remarkable. We find that such God given healing happens regularly. Healed, full lives are found to even flourish among the uncured and the ill. Two of my friends readily come to mind. One is a young woman, who was a college athlete and a successful manager. But before age 30 she was struck with a rare, incurable and painful nerve disorder, from which she was expected to die within 10 years. She would often say, that getting her disease was the best thing that happened

in her life. She would say that it was a wakeup call, opening her eyes to see the vastness, the majesty and the beauty of creation, where before she saw only her small daily slice of life. Another friend's life of addiction and mostly self-induced hardship and trouble, was abruptly ended with a massive stroke. He did experience a full recovery – cures and miracles do happen. But he will tell you that both the stroke, and his recovery to have a second chance, was a divine intervention. He now lives his new life, full of light and love, fully integrated into the whole fabric of creation. His stroke is his most treasured gift from God, and he thanks God often for it.

Now all of this sounds quite strange, I know. But this week for me, I very much needed to remember, and to reflect on, the difference between the curing of a disease, and the healing of a person. In the midst of global chaos in the financial business, I am in the process of merging my credit union with an enviable larger and stronger institution. The CEO, my new boss, is a great guy, healthy, happy and a motivated leader. He has been plagued with nagging pneumonia since early January. On Tuesday, our executive team learned that he didn't have pneumonia. As he announced to the entire organization on Wednesday, what he has is cancer. He has a baseball sized mass in his lung, three places where lymph nodes are involved, and bone involvement that won't be quantified until this coming week.

That very same Tuesday, my family and I went to visit one of Amy's friends at Primary Children's Hospital in the evening. This bright, happy, full-of-life 18-

year-old boy is the middle of three sons in a delightful family with many friends. He was in the hospital finishing the first of three scheduled rounds of chemotherapy. It was a return visit for his cancer, that had been in remission for less than a year. Between rest breaks at home, he faces two more rounds of chemo, 3 rounds of radiation, and then a bone marrow transplant. Before leaving his hospital room, we prayed. We prayed deeply and fervently, that God would be with him every minute of every day, wherever he goes and however his path unfolds. We prayed for the caregivers, that they would be at their best in their skills, in their care and in their compassion. And we prayed too for his family and friends, that they also would know the unfailing presence, the support and the uncompromising love of almighty God. I don't know if he will be cured of his cancer. I pray that he is cured. What I am very certain of though, is the presence and the power of God in the lives of all who let him in.

It will always be hard to understand why bad things, sometimes very bad things happen to good people, people that we care about. And it sometimes seems almost cruel, that cures and recovery seem so random and unpredictable, in the face of our most wretched praying. But God's promise to us has never been that our lives would be easy, or that we would not suffer. Indeed, difficulty, pain and suffering are part and parcel of human life. But whether we suffer alone, or in the comforting embrace of God, is a choice. This is God's promise, that He will always be with us. In Matthew 28 verse 20, as Jesus leaves his beloved disciples, he tells them, "remember, I am with you always, to the end of

the age.” As it says in John’s gospel, Jesus came that we might have life, and to have it more abundantly. Like the leper in today’s gospel, we too claim that Jesus can heal us and make us whole. And for us, the response of Jesus is also the same: I do choose. Be healed. Amen.