

What She Said, Part 6
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Saturday

An Untouchable Woman
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Today's Treasure

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean".
Mark 1:41

In 1974, I was assigned to a graduate internship at the US Public Health Service Hospital in Carville, LA. The buildings were on a hauntingly beautiful plantation where the original home served as the administration office.

In God's beautiful providence, those nine months have constantly informed my faith and, especially, a young woman whom I counseled. Patients with Hansen's Disease (or leprosy) had been quarantined when the public demanded that "pest houses" where patients lived, had to be moved out of the city limits of New Orleans.

Thousands of patients were admitted to the "leprosarium" which was the only one in the continental United States. Research into treatments and management was carried on by world famous physicians including Dr. Paul Brand.

Until the mid-20th century, admission to Carville meant no discharge. The suspicion about contagion was still rampant in the 1970s. Reusable soda bottles were sent to the hospital for the last use. Outgoing mail was sanitized. With the discovery of sulfone drugs for treatment, outpatient treatment became the norm but the stigma did not diminish.

Among the thousands of patients, many lived their entire lives in a thriving community. There was a mayor, a newspaper, miles of covered walk-ways for bicycles and wheelchairs, a nursing home, a cemetery, weddings, births, deaths, and all the drama inherent in a tightly knit community. There were legendary stories of nighttime escapes for dancing in town, armadillos hunted for use in research, and the admissions of famous people from all over the world. Many people acquired skills and honed talents producing works of art such as sculpture, paintings, and gardens.

The legacy of leprosy is not only Old and New Testament but continues to the 21st century. The stigma of being untouchable, incurable, and disfigured exists in most cultures.

The disfigurement of leprosy, most associated with the stigma, is not caused by the disease but is a consequence. Dr. Paul Brand, a surgeon, wrote about this in his book, "Pain the Gift Nobody Wants". When a person cannot feel pain then repetitive injury leads to infection and the deterioration of bone and tissue. One of my biggest challenges was going into the nursing home to see patients who had lost all structure to their faces. And yet there was still humanity among these dear souls and God began to melt my heart for them.

The untouchable woman: During my first month as a social work intern, I met a young woman newly admitted. She was a stunningly beautiful Asian college student and the daughter of a highly placed diplomat. The diagnosis of Hansen's Disease was, for her, worse than a death sentence. Even with the strides of treating with sulfone drugs and no outward symptoms, she was exiled. Her family had shunned her and refused to allow her to return to their home. She would not be allowed to return to her country. No one must know of her disease. I had never encountered such grief and disruption in a young life.

But Jesus... In the accounts of the leper whom Jesus healed, we read the leper came, implored, and knelt before Jesus. And Jesus moved with pity, stretched out His hand and touched him, and spoke to him saying "I will; be clean". Rosaria Butterfield refers to this as a "contagion of grace. That touch changed the man. But the touch did more than that. That touch changed the world".

I vividly remember the untouchable woman's story and the lovely cap she knitted for me. Writing her story has prompted me to pray for her even though I don't remember her name, but God does. And I pray she is touched by Jesus and the contagion of grace.

LIFE-GIVING ENCOURAGEMENT

Re-read the above story of the untouchable woman. Ask the Spirit to identify the people where you find you are repulsed by their situation. Now, ask the Spirit to show you where you think of yourself as untouchable. How has Jesus touched you? What would it look like for you to participate in the contagion of that grace you have been shown?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we thank You for Your nearness to us in spite of the ugliness and distortion of sin in our lives. Thank You for taking away our numbness to pain so that we may grow in grace and the truth of the Gospel. Make us contagious with the Gospel.

Your story: Read over your story and identify the pain that may be explicit or implicit in your memory? How has the pain in this story been a gift of the Father? What do you think would be different in your story if God had not given the gift of this pain?