

# Teacher says ‘... love the stranger as yourself’



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Some of us may remember the Bible stories and Sunday school lessons of Jesus's interactions with social outcasts including those who carried the dreaded disease of leprosy (Hansen's disease). The odd outsider and wandering wonder-worker seemed to fit in well with the misfits, daring to touch the untouchables. More modern examples come to mind: Mahatma Gandhi among the poorest of the lowest caste. Father Damien on the island of Molokai. Mother Teresa in Kolkata. Dorothy Day organizing on the streets of New York. Plus the countless "invisible saints" active in selfless service across the world. Regarding the Jesus Story, have we missed something? Do we miss the most meaningful impact of these stories when we focus attention on Jesus himself and the "miracles and magic"? Centuries of sermons highlight the miraculous healing stories making it all about the healer and healing, rather than the compassionate touch of a hu-

man being unafraid to be among those judged less than human. One prickly problem these stories present: most people were never healed. Why didn't Jesus simply stand on a hillside, wave his hand, and cure all lepers (and end poverty while he was at it)? After all, traditional creeds claim he was God in the flesh. He could have healed everyone, but chose not to.

Leaving the lofty theological questions aside for a moment, what do these "touching" moments of compassionate contact teach us today? Who are the people we don't want to touch, let alone want to see, or be close to – those who make us the most uncomfortable? Could these people be the ones we most need to see, and touch?

Sometimes I think my life has been one long strange journey among strange people. From my work at a state hospital and a school for developmentally disabled adults, to chaplain work in jails and shelters, I became very sensitive to who is considered strange and the strange ways we treat those who are different from us, physically, mentally, economically, religiously, etc.

I've had classmates, friends, family who were odd in various ways, some quite difficult to be near, but there they were, right in front of me. I could choose to walk away, or stay in relationship with them. No doubt I was odd, strange and different to them, as much they

were to me.

I suppose it truly is a choice, a decision, an attitude or outlook: the strange become "strangers"—"one of them." The other person becomes "the other" and we want to keep them at arm's length, better yet, in another town, state, or country. Who comes to mind? Trans people? LGBTQ people? Homeless people? Mentally ill people? Immigrant or incarcerated persons? Those with different skin color? Those of "the other party"? Who are the most untouchable for you?

In my view one of the most disrespectful things we've done to Jesus over the centuries is make him appear clean and comfortable to be around. Where does that image come from? An itinerant teacher wandering the dusty land of Palestine wears clean clothes and smells good? (who did his laundry?). Did the "Good Shepherd" come to pat his sheep on the head, endure the corruption of mortality and float away to a sanitized somewhere in the sky? No dirt under his fingernails or mud on his sandaled feet? Hair just right, fresh breath and fragrant body odor? How we imagine him makes all the difference in the way we encounter and relate to others who may not fit our image of what is good, worthy, righteous. We're told: "Cleanliness is

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next to godliness.” If so, Jesus failed that test. He, and all who have devoted themselves to close contact with poor and powerless people, the sick, the odd, strange and weird, are unclean by association, and touch.

To think we are “holy” or “pure” is to imagine we can separate from real life, real people, secure from seeing or experiencing the suffering of the “unwashed.”

My older half-sister Jan, who passed away a decade ago, had a childlike mind. Jan lived in a group home with an assortment of “differently abled” adults. And she was among the most sweet and gentle people I’ve known, along with

many of my mentally and physically challenged students and “outsiders” I knew as a teacher and chaplain.

Who are the people who make you the most uncomfortable? Who do you think is strange, weird, different – who makes you want to turn away, or ignore, or judge harshly? Those we don’t understand, maybe don’t want to understand, are perhaps the ones we most need to stand with, listen to, and learn from.

The “touching” Teacher of Nazareth seemed to agree with the book of Leviticus: “You shall love the stranger as yourself” (19:34).

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