

“On Leprosy and Love”

Leprosy is in the news again. Did you hear about it? A recent guest appearance by a former Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent on *Fox News* claimed that many of the people traveling in the caravan from Central America pose a serious health risk to the people of United States because they carry diseases like leprosy, smallpox and tuberculosis. The host of the show had interviewed the former ICE agent immediately after the U.S. military announced its plans to send over 5,000 troops to the southern border to await the caravan’s arrival. Newsweek reported that an additional 7,000 troops “would be kept on round-the-clock standby.” “The military is going to be a tremendous asset at the ports of entry to prevent the people from coming across the ports of entry,” the former ICE agent said. “However, what we need to look at is what happens between the ports of entry and what the border patrol is going to have to face. We have three tenants of problems here, we have national security, public safety, and public health issues with these caravans coming to the United States. . . . And they’re coming in with diseases . . . like leprosy . . . that are going to infect our people in the United States.” Since the interview took place, the Trump administration has tripled the number troops he plans to send to southern border.

Our text for today tells a story of a man named Naaman, a commander of the army of the king of Aram, who we are told, was a great man in high favor with his master because he had led the king’s army to victory. Early on in the story we are told that Naaman also suffered from leprosy. “The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy” (2 Kings 5:1b). A young girl from Israel who had been made captive by the Aramean army on one of their raids in the region is the one with the knowledge of the prophet in Samaria who can cure Naaman. The emphatic words of the young girl puts the narrative into full motion. The wife of Naaman delivers the message to the commander, her husband. We can assume that there was a certain risk in all of this for these two unnamed women. The young girl has taken a risk by sharing this knowledge to Naaman’s wife, and the wife of Naaman too has taken a risk by choosing to trust the knowledge of the young girl. Both the young girl and the unnamed woman would have presumably faced a serious threat of dismissal if what they had shared with the commander turned out to be misguided information that provided false hope. The commander, Naaman, raises the stakes for the two unnamed women when he decides to deliver this message to the king of Aram. And yet the king does not appear to hesitate upon hearing Naaman’s news. “Go then,” the king says to Naaman, “and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.” Armed with his letter and gold and silver, Naaman, the mighty warrior with leprosy, heads out to make his plea for healing to the king of Israel. When the king of Israel reads the letter and sees Naaman he perceives in the request a provocation to battle, yet again. So the king of Israel dramatically tears his clothes in distress and says: “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends words to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.” But when Elisha hears of the request and the king’s distress, he comes to the king and requests that Naaman come to him so that he may be healed. Elisha instructs Naaman to wash himself in the Jordan seven times, but Naaman is angry, frustrated, and reluctant to do this, scoffing at the notion that the dirty waters of the Jordan may have some special healing powers. When Naaman finally decides to go down to the Jordan, he immersed himself seven times and his flesh was restored, and he was made clean.

Leprosy as a disease of the body, both the individual body and the social body, has a long and complex history. Beyond the historical representation of leprosy as social stigma, the disease itself “destabilized all the usual visual markers of identity, changing one’s physical appearance.” The mycobacterium that causes leprosy enters the peripheral nerves and as a result the parts of the body that define it and distinguish become “irrevocably disfigured.” According to the International Leprosy Association, “it was often the face that most revealed the damage that leprosy could do. The nose could be affected, eyes clouded over and sight lost, eyebrows disappeared, the skin thickened with nodules and the quality of voice would change. Hands and feet were also progressively damaged as a result of repeated injuries to the fingers and toes arising from the loss of sensation that came about from damage to the peripheral nerves.” Leprosy disfigured the physical identity of the body so profoundly, and this was often accompanied by a sense of one’s loss of humanity. While legislation has varied over time and depending on place, in medieval England, for example, it was not uncommon for someone with leprosy to lose their legal identity entirely, resulting in the forfeiting of legal rights and contracts.¹ Attempts to separate those presumed to be “lepers” from the rest of society often occurred in periods of national crisis, as people with the disease often functioned as “trigger points for social frustration.”² Leprosy functioned symbolically in that it posed a threat, whether real or imagined, to the health of the social body, the body politic.

In medieval Europe, people with leprosy were most often found around towns where they would beg for a living. Sometimes monasteries would provide shelter, but if one wanted to live at a monastery one would be required to live by the rule of monastic order. More often than not, however, people afflicted with leprosy were shunned and shamed, and often pushed out of their family, isolated, and forced to live in exile. In some societies, however, showing benevolence toward those with leprosy has been considered a virtue. The European practice of establishing charitable hospitals for people with leprosy extended also into the colonial period, with the Spanish, for example, establishing leprosy hospitals on the island of Hispaniola (1520), in Mexico City (1521), Colombia (1592), Cuba (1617), Venezuela (1626), Argentina (1778), and Louisiana (1776). People with leprosy became an important element of colonial and imperial projects, dangerously converging with Christian missionary efforts in colonized regions of the world. In Africa, for example, “Leprosy offered to the missionaries the possibility of engineering new African communities, isolated from, and expunged of, all those features of African society which they saw as impeding the development of Christianity. In such institutions leprosy patients were offered their identity as a leprosy patient as a ‘liberation.’”³

In the nineteenth-century, the isolation system in Norway designed for those with leprosy received international attention when Johan Ernst Welhaven published a piece in 1816 that exposed the horrific conditions in which people with leprosy lived, calling the 400-year old, St Jørgen’s Hospital a “graveyard for the living.” Norwegian researchers claimed that leprosy was an inherited disease passed on by blood. They believed that, even if symptoms didn’t visible appear on the skin, it was latent and would break out under certain conditions. So, they reasoned, individuals deemed to be carriers of leprosy should be stopped from having children, so as not to pass on the disease to their children. And so, in 1850 Norway prohibited people with leprosy to marry and sexually segregated the population. By the late 1870s hospitalization and isolation of people with leprosy became a

¹ Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England*.

² Mary Douglas, “Witchcraft and Leprosy: Two Strategies of Exclusion”, *Man* 26.4 (Dec 1991).

³ Megan Vaughn, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

requirement. The rest of the world looked to Norway as the model for how to counteract the disease. While the Norwegian model was perhaps most influential, Hawaii's "Act to Prevent the Spread of Leprosy" in 1865 led to the eventual construction of a colony on a strip of land on the island of Molokai. Between 1866 and 1905, 5,800 people were sent to this settlement to live in isolation for the rest of their lives. This practice did not end until 1969.

In the 1860s, there was a growing concern that leprosy had become a serious problem in the colonies of the British Empire, leading to an 1867 survey conducted by the *Royal College of Physicians*. The result was a *Report on Leprosy*, which argued that compulsory detention for those with leprosy was not necessary. But all of this changed in the wake of the death of a well-known Catholic priest in the leper colony of Molokai, and after a Swedish immigrant had contracted the disease. As a result, leprosy quickly became a health scare among the British public, and debates in newspapers and journals ensued. In 1889, a book was published called *Leprosy an Imperial Danger*, which demonized people with leprosy using metaphors of invasion. He wrote: "In leper lands, that which produces leprosy is not the soil, as in malaria; nor water, as with so many infectious maladies; nor decaying food; nor destitution, but the leper itself." The person with leprosy *became* the disease. Wright argued that "lepers" would "fertilize" the soil and contaminate everything around them. Even if someone did not live in "close proximity" to a person with leprosy, there was still the possibility that "you may be attacked by the disease." You may experience a "leper attack." Leprosy was described as a great evil that spreads quickly and so must be stamped out before it "threatens to become the scourge of the whole earth." Wright maintained that it spread over time and throughout history and even suggested that the disease is immortal: "It is ever alive, ever reviving, threatening without cessation all who approach its haunts."

The book further served to reinforce the racist architecture of the modern colonial perspective, which had scientifically categorized human beings according to their "race." Wright made explicit that his concern was that leprosy was one the greatest threats to "the white race," and that Britain must take action in the colonies to stop leprosy from infecting the white race. While he believed that the "yellow" and "black" races were more susceptible to contracting the disease, he warned the British public that the white race was not immune to it. He was convinced that leprosy was passed on by enslaved people and argued that it spread "wherever an infected race was brought into contact . . . with a non-infected one." Wright warned that eventually the disease "will ruthlessly invade our colonies" and become "a common scourge throughout Europe."

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Sounds almost contemporary. Alice Walker once said that "humans, like other animals, fear and are repelled by that which they do not understand, and mere difference is apt to connote something malign." Make no mistake, what we are witnessing today, the personification and demonization of disease is nothing but the racist ground not only for the exclusion of certain bodies, brown and black, but also for the renewal of a national unity built on the mythology of the presumed health and purity of the white race. We know what he means when he promises to "make America great again," because we have been here before.

Leprosy is about bodies. Politics is about bodies. The caravan is about bodies. Love is about bodies. Healing is about bodies. Discipleship is about bodies. And nothing can be more antithetical to the *love* of the God of Elisha and of Jesus Christ than the exclusion of bodies deemed to be infected, diseased, disabled. There is an old story about Francis of Assisi. While riding on his horse one day he

encountered a leper. Even though he usually shuddered at lepers, he made himself get off his horse, and he gave the man a coin, kissing his hand as he did so. He then accepted a kiss of peace from him. A few days later, Francis moved to a hospice of people with leprosy. He called them all together and kissed the hand of each and gave them money. This was a turning point in Francis' life, for he had previously found even the sight of lepers as bitter, refusing to look at them or near to them, but now they had become his friends. We must learn to really feel this in our bones. Do you know what I mean? And we must come to understand the radical significance of *touch* as an act of love, as Gloria Anzaldúa once put it.⁴ And I mean this in a spiritual, physical, and political sense. We must learn what it means to reach out and touch those who are deemed lepers by our society. We must, in a sense, become what the world calls "lepers." For no one is an island unto him or herself. Separating ourselves from difference because of fear and prejudice is too easy. It is so easy to simply repeat the racial patterns and attitudes of the past that we have inherited from our history. It is much, much harder to resist them. But we are *all* deeply interconnected, each responsible for what is happening "down the street, south of the border or across the sea."⁵

Such touching is happening right now, as ordinary Mexican people have been showering the caravan with love. Earlier this week, a reporter interviewed a woman named Coqui Cortez, 57. She and her family live in the town of Pijijiapan and own a hardware store, not far from the border of Mexico and Guatemala. Cortez had set up a table with lemon tea and stew with meat from her son's butcher shop to feed the people on the caravan, while her daughter handed out fruit. "My family has been very blessed," Cortez said. "And we know that we are all brothers. What God gives us, we should share. But we do it with a lot of love." Cortez witnesses in her body to the love and healing of the God of Elisha and of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, "Acts of Healing," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, xxviii.

⁵ Anzaldúa, "Acts of Healing," xxviii.