

**If the Shoe Fits:
In the Sanctuary of Outcasts
The United Church of Gainesville
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Leviticus 13: 45-46 – Declaring the leper unclean

Matthew 10:7-8 - Jesus' call to his disciples to heal the sick, the lepers and minister to the poor.

Matthew 26: 61 –Jesus goes to eat at the house of Simon the Leper in Bethany

“If the shoe fits, wear it.” Basically this means: if this behavior applies to you, accept it, as in -

Jack: “Nobody likes someone who rats on other people.”

George “Are you saying I’m a tattler?”

Jack: “Well if the shoe fits, wear it.”

The saying originated in the 1700’s in England as in “If the cap fits, wear it.” The cap in question was the fool’s cap worn by the court jester. So if someone said, “Do you think I’m a fool?” The answer might be, “If the cap fits wear it.”

Evidently the popularity of Cinderella led to the shift from cap to shoe in America.

Keep that in mind. I’m coming back to it later.

First I want to tell you the story of Neil White, from his book, In the Sanctuary of Outcasts. White was a bright, good-looking, upwardly mobile graduate of the University of Mississippi in Oxford. In the 1980’s, he started his own newspaper, the “Oxford Times”. He fancied himself a champion of the people, but in the process of growing his populist paper, he convinced himself that the good he was doing justified bending some financial rules. He ran out of money, started writing himself bad checks and depositing them in his corporate account to create a temporary balance. I’ve never really understood how this works, but it’s called check kiting, and it’s illegal.

When the bank discovered that he was \$30,000 in arrears, he raised more money from his investors. Eventually it all went sour. The paper closed. The people who trusted him lost their money.

White moved to Gulfport Mississippi and started again. This time he created a glossy magazine, sort of like “Gainesville Magazine” on steroids called “Coast Magazine.” It featured the beautiful people and homes of his community. He then acquired “Louisiana Magazine” and was on a roll. Initially he did well. He was smart and well liked. He had a wonderful wife, beautiful children, and was a pillar of the St. Peter by the Sea Episcopal Church. But soon the old habits emerged again. One day his banker called him to her office. He was overdrawn by nearly one million dollars. This time there was no way out. He was convicted of

bank fraud and sentenced to a year at the Federal Prison in Carville, Louisiana.

When he arrived at Carville, an inmate waved at him. White was alarmed that there were no fingers on the inmate's hand. This is how he discovered that the Carville Federal Prison, built on a spit of land sticking out into a bend in the Mississippi River just south of Baton Rouge was established by Woodrow Wilson in 1917 as the U.S. Leprosarium.

As with so many apparent steps forward, the good of developing a safe haven for the care and treatment of people with leprosy also established a policy of segregation that amounted to imprisonment.

When White arrived, half of the residents of Carville were people with leprosy, sent there during the middle of the twentieth century, and the other half were recently incarcerated federal prisoners. Neither of course, liked the other and each resented the other's presence in their institution.

Since one of White's skills was good penmanship, he was assigned to write the daily menus in the prison/leprosarium's cafeteria. Thus he got to know the stories of the people with leprosy as well as the federal prisoners with whom he lived.

On his first day at Carville, after finishing the menu board he saw the lepers (that's what they were called) coming in. Some were on walkers, most in wheelchairs. He saw a man gripping a pork chop in fingerless hands, a growth covering one eye. He passed people with discolored faces, disfigured hands, and stumps from missing limbs. He was terrified. He didn't want to breathe their air, or accidentally touch one of them. At the end of the meal the last patient wheeled herself out, singing out to White, "There's no place like home."

An inmate who had come in to mop the floor pointed toward the woman. "She got the leprosy when she was twelve years old. Her daddy dropped her off one day and never came back. Still feeling sorry for yourself?" The woman, Ella, close to eighty years old had been there sixty eight years. White had been there six hours.

Leper is a terrible word. It defines a person by their disease. With rare exception, we do not use the name of any other disease to describe people who have it. We do not speak of leukemiacs, diabeters, or even chickenpoxers. The word leper not only describes someone with a disease, but it also conjures the image of an outcast rejected by God and the human community.

Today, leprosy is known as Hanson's disease. It is not actually a skin disease, but rather a disease of the central nervous system. No one is exactly clear how it is transmitted. If people with Hanson's disease take their medications, they are not contagious. There are theories that Hanson's disease can be spread through intimate skin to skin contact, eating infected armadillos or breathing an infected droplet.

In bible times, leprosy was different. Every time the word leper or leprosy is used in my New Revised Standard Version of the bible, there is a footnote explaining that this word was a catch all term for any of a large variety of skin diseases. It was not necessarily the same disease we know as Hansen's Disease today. Realize that we really did not begin to understand how diseases spread until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Disease was a random event, so it is understandable that in biblical times, when soap had not yet been invented, skin diseases were good to stay away from.

Ella, the woman in the wheel chair, told White a story that changed his life. When Ella was a child her school teacher noticed a lesion on her skin and sent her home. A bounty hunter with a gun, paid by the state, drove to her farm, hammered a quarantine sign on her family's two room shack and said "Stay put." He was going to put Ella in his truck and take her to Carville. Her father said, "She my girl. I'm takin' her." The bounty hunter told Ella's father that if she wasn't at Carville in three days, he was coming back for her.

Ella's family killed a chicken and had a feast that night. She did not know it would be their last meal together. The next morning before dawn Ella's father hitched up the mule, put Ella in the wagon and took her for the two day trip to Carville. He left her there at the gate where she spent the rest of her life.

Ella was just one of the many people with leprosy that White became close to. One day at chapel, a man with leprosy who had gone blind and whose hands no longer had any sensation, read the Braille service with his tongue.

White figured that if this man could accomplish this in his life, he too could change his ways.

What then would he do with his awareness? How could he escape all that he was?

At the end of his year at Carville, Ella told him another story. Years ago the local Coca Cola dealer only delivered chipped and cracked bottles of Coke to Carville that couldn't be returned for deposit. He was afraid of a boycott of Coke if people found out that the bottles had been to the leprosarium.

The result was, she said, "more coke bottles than you ever seen." As bottles stacked up, patients discovered new uses for non-returnable bottles. They used them as flower vases, sugar dispensers in the cafeteria, even pins for impromptu bowling games on the lawn. They stuffed them upside down in the dirt to line flower beds.

Ella said, "CoCola bottle still a CoCola bottle. Just found 'em a new purpose."

White took this to heart. He didn't need to be a new person; he needed a new purpose. He accepted what he had done, the pain he caused the people he had cheated, the trust he had betrayed, the heartbreak he inflicted on his wife and children that caused her to

divorce him. The shoe fit. He would wear it. He was chipped and cracked, but like the old Coke bottle, he could find a new purpose. His goal was to follow the way Ella survived Carville her whole life, living simply, hiding nothing and helping others.

I think God gets our attention in encounters like this. Jesus healed lepers, sent his disciples out to minister to them, but the telling moment to me comes in the end of the gospel of Matthew. Here in chapter 26, Matthew writes simply that Jesus goes to the house of Simon the leper in Bethany. When I tell you what happens next, you'll remember the story right away. This is where a woman breaks in to the meal, pours precious ointment on Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair and her tears. And suddenly we're off to a debate on whether this was an extravagant waste of money or a blessing.

That story quickly overtakes this simple opening sentence that Jesus and his disciples went to the home of Simon the leper, a sentence that may be more important than the story itself. Jesus and his disciples were eating at the home and table of a person with a name – Simon, who had a most dreaded disease - leprosy.

My hunch is that like Neil White in his book, this was not just an example of Jesus' showing off his extravagant love. This was how Jesus learned love and grew from it. Simon taught Jesus stories from his sanctuary of outcasts that gave Jesus a new direction.

I believe that it is often in the intensity of community that we meet the truth of accepting the outcasts among us who in turn show us who we are.

It is Ella, confined to the leprosarium at Carville, Louisiana for sixty four years who holds up the mirror of Neil White's inner disfigurement, his refusal to look at himself, what he did to those who loved and trusted him, and his headstrong desire for his own success.

It is only those closest to us who can say the words, "If the shoe fits..." with any chance that we will hear it.

When I visit death row, I pass through seven gates of iron bars that open before me and close behind me. I enter the prison, show my I.D. and place my hand on a palm print sensor. One gate opens and then closes behind me before the next gate opens to where I am searched, hand over my driver's license and receive a beeper in case of emergency. Another gate opens and I go outside. Another gate opens and I walk down a chain link fenced in path with coiled razor wire covering every wall. I see men, mostly African American, raking, mowing, sweeping. The gate at the end of the chain linked fence path, another gate opens. I enter the building that houses Death Row. Another gate opens and closes behind me before the last gate opens. I go to the small room interview room. Ray Meeks is brought to me from his death row cell in his orange jump suit, his hands manacled to a chain around his waist that is linked to a chain on his feet. The door to that room is locked behind us. Ray always smiles, glad to see me, and we talk about memories, and sports, TV shows and what

he's reading in his bible. He holds up a mirror to me that puts the essentials of my life in quite a perspective.

At our best we at UCG are a sanctuary of outcasts. Most of us are here because we would have a hard time fitting in at other churches. And sometimes I'm afraid that makes it hard for us to fit in with each other.

It's easiest for me to stay in safe places with people who like me and are like me. But my greatest hope is that I will find those times when I see the outcasts, they will see me, and I will see myself.

My hope is that we will continue to see this as a goal for our church, a church of people chipped and broken like those unreturnable coke bottles, a church where each of us knows we can turn to another for help, a church where we can ask for forgiveness when we have screwed up and find healing when we are wounded. I hope that this is a church where we can come without being consumed by image or money. I hope this is a church where we can sit down with one another's brokenness as easily as Jesus sat down with Simon the Leper. And I hope most of all that this is a church where we can not forget the hard learnings of our lives that have renewed us along the way. I hope we can look the tough lessons we learn in our struggle to be a true community of faith and say, with Neil White, "In a sanctuary for outcasts, I understood the truth. Surrounded by men and women who could not hide their disfigurement, I could see my own."

(Neil White, In The Sanctuary of Outcasts, William Morrow, 2009)