

Debunking 3 of the Most Common Myths About This Dreaded Disease

What a relief that leprosy—the most dreaded disease of Bible times—is a thing of the past, right?

Perhaps it's surprising to you to learn that's actually not the case. Leprosy—also known as Hansen's disease—is very much alive and active today.

In America, there are 150-250 new cases of leprosy every year, mostly in southern states. The U.S. statistics pale in comparison with the global number of new leprosy cases each year. More than 200,000 new cases were reported worldwide last year, mostly in South Asia.

When fully developed, leprosy is horribly disabling and disfiguring. But at the same time, the sting of this much-feared disease has been largely eased in this era of antibiotics that can cure the disease in its early stages.

In leprosy-endemic regions such as South Asia, however, leprosy continues to cause mayhem simply because its victims are either too scared, or without enough resources, to seek medical help when symptoms begin to appear. Often, they're terrified they'll become outcasts and undesirables if people discover they have leprosy because of the deep shame associated with the disease, which is sadly the case for many.

But left untreated, leprosy ravages the body, causing skin lesions, disabilities, paralysis and blindness. It robs victims of a sense of self-worth. And it leads to abandonment by neighbors and family who believe the person is cursed.

Few people want to be around someone with advanced leprosy.

Fewer still want to touch a person with the disease. Would you? It's far easier to ignore leprosy—and focus on more “attractive” and photo-friendly causes instead.

Leprosy is hardly a pleasant topic for conversation, but common myths about this ancient disease still linger today and fan the flames of fear. For this reason, Jan. 26 is World Leprosy Day, an annual event that aims to fight stigma and persistent myths:

Myth No. 1: Leprosy is highly contagious. Actually, no—it's difficult to catch leprosy from someone else. Ninety-five percent of adults have a built-in immune system that prevents them from catching it. You can't get leprosy by shaking hands or casual social contact. Think of Mother Teresa who served for years among those with leprosy and never contracted the disease.

Myth No. 2: Leprosy causes fingers and toes to drop off. Digits don't “fall off” due to leprosy. The disease attacks the nerves, causing fingers and toes to become numb and prone to infection and damage.

Myth No. 3: Leprosy is the result of sin or a curse. Leprosy is caused by the slow-growing bacteria *Mycobacterium leprae*.

In Bible times, people with leprosy—or “lepers” as Scripture refers to them—were doomed to a life of terrible affliction, physical disfigurement and social rejection. They were cast out of community life and their own families, suffering alone in agony, or confined to leprosy colonies.

What Did Jesus Do?

Jesus did something that no one had ever done before. He reached out his hand and touched the leper (Matt. 8:3), bringing love and instant healing.

Jesus touched lepers when others ran away from them. He

shunned myths, prejudice and stigma to pour out compassion on those who were being shunned. Leprosy—the disease that struck terror into every heart—became a channel through which God’s love and healing flowed to the marginalized and the outcasts.

How does this speak to the church in America today? Are we prepared to leave our comfortable sanctuaries and coffee bars and venture into a world of “undesirables” no one else will associate with or touch? Will we be “the touch of Jesus” to the “lepers” of our world—the homeless, the addict and the mentally ill? It’s not a glamorous job—but you and I are compelled by God’s love and Jesus’ own example.

The age-old lesson that leprosy teaches us in 2020 is this: to touch those no one else will touch, and love those despised and rejected by others.

Jesus was a lover of outcasts.

Are you? {eoa}

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