

A compassionate cartographer

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Feb. 12, 2012

A missionary in East Africa was approached by a young boy from one of the local tribes. He asked, "Was Jesus a white man or a black man?"

After thinking for a while, the missionary said that while he was on Earth, Jesus lived in a very warm climate. So, she told the boy, "Jesus wasn't white or black but sort of in between the two. He was probably kind of brown."

"Oh," said the little boy with delight, "then he belongs to both of us, doesn't he?"

The missionary underscored one of the qualities of Jesus that is so clear in today's Gospel: Jesus, who incarnated the love of God in himself, was so invested in the human condition that he was all things to all people. He was approachable to all people, even lepers.



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"A leper came to Jesus," says Mark (first reading), despite the fact that leper had

every reason to stay away. Lepers were called the "living dead." The law forbade them to approach the rest of the community. The man who approached Jesus was putting himself in danger. Those present could become violent toward him in an effort to preserve their own health. Nevertheless, the appeal of Jesus was so great that the man disregarded every obstacle in order to come to him. Did he, like the young African boy, have a sense that Jesus somehow belonged to him, and he to Jesus? Perhaps he realized that in Jesus' presence, the traditional boundaries that separated the various groups in his society were not valid. Jesus went to places (such as Samaria, or the homes of sinners) that were usually off-limits to the righteous. He associated with those known to be unclean or ritually impure -- sinners, the sick, foreigners. Not only did Jesus remain holy, clean and pure when associating with those whom others avoided, but his presence extended holiness and wholeness to them.

Jerome Neyrey has described Jesus' all-inclusive missiology as his redrawing of the "maps of purity." (*The Social World of Luke-Acts*, Hendrickson Pub., 1991). Previously, the map of holy places referred to the Temple; after Jesus' appearance, he himself became the holy place and the new center of the map. Thereafter, all holiness would be measured in its proximity to Jesus. Similarly, in the traditional map of people, God's chosen ones had been specially set apart. However, the new map of persons drawn by Jesus, the compassionate cartographer, was all-inclusive -- not just of every nation but especially of sinners, the poor, the blind, the lame,

the marginalized and the forgotten. According to this new map, even a leper could approach him and find welcome and belonging.

Jesus also drew a new map of the body. According to the traditional map, purity or holiness was associated with certain ablutions, with circumcision and with specific dietary regulations. But with Jesus, purity and holiness were understood as an interior disposition brought about by grace and by the believer's response to God. "Hear me, all of you," Jesus said. "Nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile a person; but the things that come out from within are what defile. ... From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, etc. All these evils come from within, and they defile" (Mark 7:14, 20-22).

When Jesus looked at a leper or any other person who had no place on the traditional map of holiness, he did not see defilement. Rather, he saw a beloved brother or sister whose suffering offered an opportunity to show the depth and warmth of God's healing love for all people. When people saw what Jesus did and what the church did in his name, after his resurrection, they complained, "These people have turned the world upside down!" (Acts 17:6).

Do our actions and our maps similarly disturb our contemporaries? Do we still represent a Jesus who belongs to everyone?

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