

6 Sunday B

February 14, 2021

St. Patrick

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We heard these words about the leper from the Old Testament Book of Leviticus: **“...Being unclean, such a person shall live alone with their dwelling outside the camp.”**

For these past eleven months many of us—myself included—know about being quarantined from the wider community. It has been in response to a deadly enemy which we can't even see: Covid-19.

Neil White had everything going for him. In his late 20s, married with two young children, editor of the social magazine in Oxford, Mississippi. Everything was grand for him until he was sent to prison for mail fraud of more than a million dollars.

As he arrived at the prison in Carville, Louisiana, one of the first persons he met was Miss Ella Bounds, rolling her antique wooden, hand-cranked wheelchair toward him. She had no legs. The first thing she said to Neil White, “There's no place like home.”

He had been sent to a minimum-security prison, shared with 130 people who had leprosy. In fact, for the most part of the twentieth century, anyone who contacted Hansen's disease was quarantined in Carville.

**“...Being unclean, such persons shall live alone with their dwelling outside the camp.”**

Neil White was given a job in the shared cafeteria—one side for those with leprosy, the other for the inmates. One of his first days he was writing the lunch and dinner menu on the menu board. Someone tapped him on the back. He turned around, and a leper told him to use a purple marker: “We can see purple the best.” As he said this, a droplet of his spit sailed from his mouth and landed on Neil White's cheek. White knew then that he was going to die of leprosy. He was traumatized.

All this is recounted skillfully in his memoir published after he was released from prison, entitled *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts* (1). I read it and was riveted by his story—and those with whom he was quarantined.

As part of his cafeteria job, Neil White would get to the cafeteria at 5:30 a.m., alone except for Miss Ella. They would enjoy coffee together. Miss Ella eventually told him her story. When she was in the fourth grade, a doctor came to give the students shots at her school for blacks. He noticed a blotch on her leg and pricked it with a needle. Ella felt nothing. A week later a bounty hunter came to the school to get Ella. He drove her to her home and told her father he was taking her to Carville. She had been in that lifelong quarantine there for 67 years, and she never saw her family again.

As Neil White later put his hopes, “I wanted to remember...the way she (Ella) turned her disease, the most shameful known to man, into something sacred. I wanted to remember...the way she rested her hand on top of mine when I felt most alone.”

On Sundays Neil White would go to Mass led by a Franciscan priest, Father Reynolds. The chapel would be peopled by inmates like him, and seated with blind, broken and some horribly disfigured members of the leprosarium. Everyone’s brokenness was on full display, and slowly Neil White could take off the mask and truly be himself—before God and before his fellow church members at Carville (2).

Two weeks before he finished his imprisonment there, the community of 130 lepers was having a dance. Miss Ella asked Neil White if he would come and do the first dance with her...and he did. Imagine the scene that took place! The two of them dancing—White leading Miss Ella’s wheelchair, her hands raised in the air, both of them laughing with joy, as they circled the floor and made twists and turns. This St. Valentine’s Day, these two portrayed—poignantly and amazingly—a love between them.

When Neil White left for good, the last thing Miss Ella counseled him was, “Don’t forget to go to church.” Neil White ends his book with this learning, “I would take Ella’s advice and find a church...A place like the church at Carville. Where the parishioners were broken and chipped and cracked. A place to go when I needed help. A place to ask forgiveness. A sacred place where people were not consumed with image or money” (3).

Friends: Hasn’t that been the decades-old make-up of St. Patrick’s?—To be truly a sanctuary of outcasts. Isn’t that our vision, *our* calling? **“A man with leprosy came to Jesus....Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.”** In so doing, Jesus became a fellow outcast... at Carville...and here, with us.

- (1) Neil White, *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010). See also Neil White, “No Place Like Home,” NPR audio of February 21, 2014) <https://www.npr.org/2014/02/21/280696552/no-place-like-home>.
- (2) Finely reflected on by Jason Bybee in “A Theological Reading of *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*: Church” (January 3, 2017) in [jasonbybee.com](http://jasonbybee.com).
- (3) White, *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*, pp. 302-03.

*General Intercessions*

*February 14, 2021*

*6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time B*

**Transform your Church so that we may reflect the compassion and inclusive love of Jesus—the outcast and *our* Savior;  
we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Be with those most in danger because of the frigid cold;  
we pray to you, O Lord—**

**During this Black History Month, heed the groans for justice of those who, due to racism, are weighed down by oppression;  
we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Give healing to the sick, especially those with Covid-19; give protection to those who have received the vaccine; give us care in protecting others from the coronavirus; and deepen hope within us all; we pray to you, O Lord—**

**On this St. Valentine's Day, bless all those couples joined together in love; we pray to you, O Lord—**

**Welcome into your eternal light all who have died, especially Ruth Gathje, and all who have perished from the coronavirus;  
we pray to you, O Lord—**

