I have found that the best place to pray is in the stairwell at the Moncton City Hospital. There’s a nice echo in there, and it has a certain amount of privacy if you time it right. I remember sitting in the stairwell on a few different occasions. Even once or twice for my own needs. I’ve tried to pray in the chapel but I get a bit claustrophobic. But sitting there in a stairwell, well, I can’t help but feel closer to God. It’s the up and down of it. Stairway to heaven?

The prayer offered by the leper today is this: “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”

All of us have prayed that prayer in one way or another. We’ll all face serious illness. Each and every one of us will go to
our doctors, nurses and hospitals and will use the best of medical resources. And each and every one of us will deeply pray and beg, “Jesus, if you will, you have the power to heal: my son, my daughter, my mom, my dad, my friend. Me. Please Lord, use your powers to make the medical treatments that I am receiving effective. In your name. Amen.” I’ve prayed that prayer a lot. I used to have good friends by the name of Bob and Betty Mueller who mentored me in ministry and taught me more about prayer than anyone else. Bob was the retired minister at my first church, and Betty was his partner in ministry. Bob was a gentle man who towered above me, and Betty is a beautiful woman who is quick to laugh and is the first in the room to name the presence of God in her life, with sweeping joy, and sometimes with devout seriousness. I loved to pray with them, because they were the first people who prayed out loud, about whatever was on their mind. Sometimes they prayed with the laying on of hands. They always prayed for me. When I was sick, they prayed. When I was stressed, they prayed. When we had dinner, we prayed. I sent a friend who was struggling to meet with Bob and Betty, who prayed with and for him and I never saw my friend so relaxed and at ease with himself.

And then, right in front of Jesus, there appears a "dead man walking": a leper who begs to be made clean, if Jesus wills it. Fred Craddock describes the leper's loneliness, living as "a corpse haunting the edges of the community he could no longer enter." *(Preaching Through the Christian Year B.)* He was considered unclean because his physical imperfection violated the Holiness Code of his people, found in the Book of Leviticus. "God made the world in a certain ordered fashion," Graydon Snyder writes. "People were also created in a clearly defined manner. If they were born with a defect, became visibly diseased, or their body didn't function correctly, then they were unclean." *(The Lectionary Commentary)*
In other words, this was a situation for the priests, not the doctors.

Touch is something that’s so important. Those moments that go from talking about the weather to making every sentence count. The moments where we no longer shake hands but hold hands.

Once we get a sense of how the leper might have felt, we have to deal with Jesus' reaction to his plea. "Moved with pity" sounds very nice, until we see the footnote that other ancient texts read "with anger." While the thought of Jesus being angry at a leper who asks to be made clean may disturb us, there's reason to believe it's the accurate translation. As texts were copied over and over, scribes sometimes substituted a more palatable word for any that might not fit with their image of Jesus. Every copy then made from that edited version would preserve that change, but those made from unedited copies would preserve the earlier word. So scholars tend to go with the more difficult translation when there's a conflict between texts, and then try to understand why it was used. We commonly say that a person's pain touches our heart, but Graydon Snyder reminds us that "in Hebrew thought compassion comes from the guts." (The Lectionary Commentary) So Jesus felt something powerful, something physical, when he looked at this man, an emotion better translated, Richard Swanson says, as "Jesus felt his stomach turn." (Provoking the Gospel of Mark) That’s sometimes our reaction too, isn’t it? Shouldn’t it be that we get angry when people are sent away for “being unclean”?

Ched Myers interprets it as, "You could declare me clean if only you would dare." They only make sense if the man had already been to the priests, who for some reason had rejected his petition. Deciding to make an issue out of it, Jesus sternly gives the leper these orders: See that you say nothing to anyone! Rather, go back and show yourself to the priest and
make the offering prescribed by Moses for your cleansing as a witness against them. Go show yourself to the ones who declared you unclean and show them that you are part of this world.

In a 2002 interview, Whitney Houston told Diane Sawyer, “The biggest devil is me. I’m either my best friend or my worst enemy.” It’s true what she says, and knowing that Whitney was going through things that were bigger than herself, I’m grateful to God for the moments of joy she knew and the courage it took her to face each and every day of what would be a short life.

How do we respond to healing in our lives? “You changed my mourning into dancing.” What a powerful image. I was grieving, living in despair, and then God turned it all around and I end up dancing for joy. From funeral clothing (sack cloth) to festive clothing. How do we move from one to the other? What is the requirement? Is emphasizing finding joy in the midst of difficult times making light of such realities? Can we find joy in life, even if things don't get sorted out how we wish? That is, do we wait for healing on our own terms, or are we able to find hope in the midst of difficult times? How do we allow ourselves to experience Good News in the midst of sadness and despair? After we’ve walked through the valley of the shadow of death?

Barbara Brown Taylor again: "There are a million ways to proclaim the good news, and we sell God short when we forget that, when we try to force ourselves into a narrow mold or fall silent because we cannot. Every now and then we may be called upon to stand up in some public place and give account for the hope within us, but nine times out of ten our evangelism will be the quiet kind: reading psalms to a sick friend, telling the truth to someone who has asked for it, ...writing
a note that restores hope... those are all proclamations of the good news."

I’d like to end with this poem written by Jan Richardson, a minister and artist I met a few years back at a retreat.

**What the Light Shines Through**  
*A Healing Blessing*

*For Joe*  
Where pain  
does not touch you.  
Where hurt  
does not make its home.  
Where despair  
does not haunt you.  
Where sorrow  
does not dwell.  
Where disease  
does not possess you.  
Where death  
does not abide.  
Where horror  
does not hold you.  
Where fear  
does not raise its head.  
Where your wounds  
become doorways.  
Where your scars  
become sacred maps.  
Where tears  
become pools of gladness.  
Where delight  
attends your way.  
Where every kindness  
you have offered
returns to you.
Where each blessing
you have given
makes it way back
to you.
Where every grace
gathers around you.
Where the face of love
mirrors your gaze.
Where you are
what the light
shines through.