

Bringing in the Outcast

Does your church reach out to those people who are so hard to love? Do you?

BY JOHN NORMAN

Henry was a "social leper" in our church — estranged and untouchable like the lepers of Israel. He came from a lifestyle that repelled most people. His opinion of himself had been devastated by his failures, so he struggled to find some sense of worth. He cried out for love with every action, every word, every little gesture. Desperate for love, he would do virtually anything for even the smallest hint that someone cared.

But Henry had never learned basic social skills. He was often inconsiderate, rude, insensitive, and overly demanding. All this made his problem worse. People avoided him. He had no real friends. Tragically, in the community of the redeemed, Henry's self-image got worse, not better.

Most of us tolerated Henry in the name of Christian love. But we didn't like him. Many of us secretly wished he would find a new church. He shopped around a few times, but he always came back. He never found love and acceptance in the other churches he visited, either.

Henry stumbled from group to group, from social clique to social clique, hungering for love that always eluded him. We talked about loving him, but we didn't do it. And because it was so obvious that the people of God didn't love him, Henry couldn't believe that God loved him either. So he lived pathetically in sorrow, desperation, and despair. One day after church Henry cornered me. I freely admit that I wished he had chosen someone else, but he trapped me, so I stayed a few minutes and we talked. Though I never intended it, I gave Henry what he wanted; someone who would simply listen to him. And he latched onto me with an iron grip. He became my shadow, and I began five years of personal ministry that were the most frustrating, yet often the most rewarding, or my life.

Henry made me uncomfortable just by standing beside me. He would stare at me for minutes on end with a silly grin on his face, not saying anything. He often asked me for a ride to and from church, even though his house was ten miles out of my way and there were other church members who lived within a mile of him. He always wanted to sit with me. He asked me out for coffee after almost every service. He called me often during the week and asked me to do him favors, almost always at inconvenient times and involving great effort on my part.

Part of me wanted to scream at him, "Stay out of my life! Can't you leave me a little time to myself?" I didn't like that part of me very much.

If I refused him a favor, I often wondered, *Was I too firm?* If I gave in, I wondered, *Was I firm enough?* And knowing that my heart wasn't always in my actions, I kept thinking, *Am I unspiritual because I dislike Henry's personality and am so frustrated by what he does?*

For five years I tried to be Henry's friend. Sometimes I succeeded, sometimes I failed. I never became comfortable with him. At last I moved out of town and left Henry behind.

We all have "lepers" in our lives — people we don't want to touch because we're repelled by their personalities, social skills, or emotional problems. Too often, we exclude certain people even from the Body of Christ because they don't seem to fit in — another church would be better for them, we think.

They may be poor or not as well-dressed as we are. They may live on the streets or have long hair. They may be physically or mentally handicapped. They may be outwardly suffering the consequences of some "big sin" of the past. They live as outcasts, even to the Church. They are the lepers of our day.

Yet the local church should be a community that ministers to the hurting. That means that if we are fulfilling our design, these hurting people will be welcome among us. If not, something is wrong.

How can we minister effectively to the Henrys among us? I have found these five steps helpful.

REMEMBER THAT WE ARE ALL OUTCASTS.

I'll never forget being told by a friend that she hadn't liked me very much when she first met me. I was shocked to discover that I had been a "social leper" in someone else's life! It was no easy experience, but it helped me to have more compassion for Henry and others like him.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Eph. 2:12, "Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel... without hope and 'without God in the world.'" So we all were once "social lepers," excluded from the community of God's people, alienated from the only true arena for emotional health: the Church. But God's love transformed us and brought us into a loving, accepting community that transcends all the barriers that nonChristian society erects between its members:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.... Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.”

-Eph. 2:13-14,19

We must remember that apart from God's gift of acceptance, we are all Henrys. We are all lepers, outcasts, outsiders, the unlovely, and the undesirable of society. If we remember how God loved us when we were unlovable, we can have ever deepening compassion for the Henrys in our midst.

MAKE A COMMITMENT.

A prior commitment to loving the unlovable will help us to persevere despite frustration. It will help us to love "social lepers" regardless of their response.

I learned this lesson from my friendship with Henry. Because I stumbled into it, I had no such prior commitment, so I failed at being Henry's friend more than I succeeded.

We need to make a clear, unequivocal commitment, as both individuals and churches, to loving the unlovable. And we need to make this commitment before we attempt to become involved with "social lepers." Otherwise we will abandon half-hearted attempts at ministry to the unlovable when relationships get rough. Prior commitment to God can keep us going in the face of ingratitude from the people we love and misunderstanding or criticism from friends.

LOVE BY CHOICE.

God doesn't love us because we are lovable; He loves us because He has chosen to love us. This is the kind of love that transformed us, and it is the kind of love that will transform "social lepers." In the same way that God loves us, we need to love the Henrys among us, not because they are lovable or because we always feel like loving them, but because we choose to love them.

I rarely *felt* like loving Henry. When I listened to my feelings and avoided him, I injured him and fell miserably short of the pattern of Christ. But when I *chose* to demonstrate love to him despite my feelings, I succeeded in being his friend.

SPEND TIME WITH THEM.

Jesus befriended tax-gatherers and sinners. He chose lowly fishermen as His disciples and said that He had come to preach the gospel to the poor (Lk. 4:18).

He spent time with those people, though His society criticized Him for it and He often found His patience tried by their failures, their ineptness, their faithlessness and selfishness.

In my friendship with Henry I fought a lot with jealousy of my time. I would not have objected to greeting him occasionally. But associating with Henry was no light matter. He needed *time* with me. It was the only way he could sense the love and acceptance of God’s people.

We need to spend time with our Henrys. Paul teaches us this principle in Romans 12:16, when he exhorts us to “associate with people of low position.” Saying a nervous “Hello” to the lowly and turning away is not enough — we must *associate* with the “lepers” in our lives. They should be our companions.

Any so-called love that is not born out of such sacrificial involvement with the unlovable is not God's compassion. Jesus said in Luke 6:32 that it is no credit to us if we love only those who love us, for even unbelievers do that. We are all quite willing to lay down our lives for the smooth, handsome, polished senior pastor. But the true test of love is whether we will lay down our lives for the “social lepers.”

EXPECT TO STRUGGLE.

Finally, we need to live with the inner struggle that inevitably comes with loving "social lepers." Friendship with the Henrys of our world is not easy. It costs us something. Love always does. It is always easier to turn and walk away. Loving Henry was never easy for me. Sometimes I wished I had never met him because I struggled so much, wondering whether I was responding correctly to him. Loving him cost me peace of mind. But I drew comfort from remembering that it also cost God infinitely more to love me.

The Jews of Jesus’ day considered leprosy a symbol of sin. Lepers were banished from Jewish society. But Jesus showed His love for lepers by touching and healing them, even at the risk of social scandal (Mt. 8:1-4).

We often speak of reaching out to the world with God's love. But God's love cost Him His Son. It hurt God to love us. Love without cost is not love. Love without sacrifice or struggle is a cheap imitation, not the real thing.

Because of the problems "social lepers" experience in life, they need firm, tough love. They rarely want it, but they need it. For example, because he was often overly demanding, Henry needed to hear me say "no," often simply for the discipline of living with reality.

Saying "no" won't always be easier than saying "yes," even if it saves us time and effort. If we choose to be involved with "social lepers," we will ask ourselves repeatedly if our firmness is effective or correct. Sometimes we'll never know the answer. We'll always struggle emotionally when we befriend the lowly. We must accept our struggles as the price of love, even if we never resolve them.

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me," said Jesus at the start of His ministry, "because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19).

The Henrys around us challenge churches to be communities in which the wounded are healed, the imprisoned are set free, and the oppressed are released. For "social lepers" are wounded. Continual rejection has bruised and scarred their hearts until they rarely feel anything but pain. They are imprisoned — bound to other people's opinions. They desperately want to be delivered from self-loathing, but constant insults and demeaning remarks prevent their finding such freedom. And they are oppressed, emotionally downtrodden. Repeated humiliation has left them emotionally abused, afraid even to hope for release from the cruel treatment society heaps on them every day.

If "social lepers" cannot find healing in the Church; if they cannot find freedom in the Body of Christ; if they cannot find release from oppression in the community of the redeemed, where will they find them? Nowhere.

Part of our mission as the Church of Jesus Christ is to reach out in compassion to the outcasts in our world so that they might be transformed by Christ's love shown through us. Will we ignore them, or will we, like Jesus, give them the healing, liberating touch of love? The choice is ours.

A STORY OF HOW TO MINISTER TO THE "WEAKER BROTHER"

The little church's aisles swelled with the Easter gathering until there were no more pews to squeeze into. The organ and the piano harmonized "He is Risen" a few extra times while the deacons lined up the last chairs from the church hall along the back of the sanctuary. A few more latecomers shuffled down the side aisles and leaned against the wall.

Then I noticed Andy's entrance. His smile beamed with a sense of Easter joy until he saw that "his" spot in the back row was filled. Regular attenders usually left the seat empty, knowing that Andy would arrive late from the home for the mentally handicapped.

Confusion masked his face now as the introit ended and he had found no place to sit. With characteristic simplicity Andy made his way up the center aisle to a large clearing just below the platform where the elders, ministers, and choir members stood poised to open the service. He lowered his huge body to the floor, crossing his legs Indian style.

As the rest of us sat down, another man, a deacon in the church for many years, left his place in the pew and started slowly up the center aisle toward Andy. It took Marvin a long time to reach the front. Respect for this eighty-year old servant, much loved by all of us, or perhaps sheer curiosity, brought a hush over the whole church. Even the minister gripped the sides of the podium and watched.

Slowly Marvin shifted his lean frame on to the cane and lowered his aged body to the floor beside Andy.

With tears in his eyes, the minister closed his Bible over his sermon notes.

"Our sermon has just been preached," he said. "But the Lord would speak one further word to the rest of us:

'Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Mt. 25:40).

Too often, when the Lord sends a "weaker brother" to us, we don't recognize Christ in him. And even when we want to reach out to unusual people, we may be held back by feelings of awkwardness or fear. How can we begin to love and minister to these precious members of the Body of Christ?

1. *Put the weaker brother high on your prayer list.* Ask God for ideas about ways to reach him, and then pray for continued wisdom. Ask God to show you how he thinks, feels, and responds. Listen for hints showing past events that need healing. Then pray for these areas specifically.
2. *Allow him to give to you in some significant way.* Each person has a gift. Helping someone to recognize and use that gift will make him feel significant as well as filling a need.
3. *Treat him with the same respect you would treat a person of highest rank.* Think of the weaker person as Christ in disguise to avoid speaking to him in a condescending manner.
4. *Ask questions that will bring out his interests, his needs, and his strengths.* Then listen actively to learn about some very highly sensitive and developed skills.
5. *Take time to teach him how to have a daily devotional life.* After he is established, ask him often how it is going and talk to him about what he is reading in the Bible. Pray with him over areas of concern or failure.

6. *Continually lead him toward Jesus.* Don't encourage too much leaning: he may become overly dependent and follow you instead of Christ.
7. Invite him to a regular family event, and encourage him to become a friend rather than a guest. If you hear about an activity that would interest him, do it with him as a family.
8. Encourage him to fellowship with other members of the body. Have a birthday party and invite others, or get a picnic together after church. Others will follow your example and reach out when they see the former outcasts responding to your love.

- Ellen Weber

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