

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to love, radical love, but while there are people who embrace it, it is not something we often see modeled in the world. I was reminded of just such radical love a few years ago when Brian and I enjoyed a very quiet week on the island of Molokai. It's not one of the islands in the Hawaiian chain that attracts a lot of tourists, and the residents pretty much prefer it that way. You can't find a major hotel, golf course or much nightlife there. The two-lane road that runs the width of the island on its south side has one stop sign. The week there was one of those once in a lifetime experiences and we really got away from it all in the isolated condo community where we stayed and the nearly empty beach we enjoyed. But, this trip was on my bucket list because as a young adult I had stumbled onto the story of a priest named Father Damien and I wanted to visit the leper colony where he had transformed lives in ministry to the sick on the north side of Molokai.



The story of Father Damien is one of calling, perseverance, courage, and radical love. If you aren't familiar with his life and ministry, I invite you to investigate him and if ever you get a chance, visit the town of Kalaupapa on Molokai. But, should you decide to do so, be aware that just getting to the community is an adventure. You see, in the mid-1800s when Hawaii sought to contain the spread of leprosy, this seaside settlement was the drop-off endpoint for people who had or were suspected of having what is also called Hansen's disease, and it was aptly chosen for its inaccessibility to the rest of the island.

While much is known about this bacterial infection now, throughout history it was greatly feared, tragically disfiguring and often resulted in what I'd judge to be a lonely and difficult existence. Leprosy presents with nerve damage and respiratory difficulty, and historically, all around the world, its diagnosis meant immediate removal from the community. Victims were often left to fend for themselves in the elements.

The steep cliffs and rocky shores surrounding the little outcropping of land where the Kalaupapa developed helped to contain the inhabitants sometimes dropped off into the ocean just off the coast if the shore proved too threatening for the transport ships. Father Damien volunteered to move to the colony and provided pastoral and medical care to a community of the forgotten until he too contracted the disease and died 16 years later.

Brian and I decided to visit Kalaupapa which is now a National Historic Park and still home to a handful of Hansen's Disease survivors and family members. It requires a permit, has many restrictions on visitor behaviors and can be reached by only one of three ways. Boats only deliver supplies to the dock so tourists have the options of flying in, hiking the 3.5 mi switchback trail or riding mules on that same path. We opted for the mules. Quickly, we understood how effectively the earth assisted in patrolling the colony as we could only travel single file at roughly 1mph most of the way down the sheer side.



It is hard to convey how this experience felt. At the least, for us, seeing and sitting in the pews of the church Father Damien had helped to build, and walking a field of unmarked graves, was challenging and humbling. For the Hawaiian people who experienced life here or loved those who were sent to the colony, his compassion was the touch of Creator entering their world.

As a Catholic priest, he had opted for a life of significant religious service, but traded even that for one of radical love, believing each person he encountered was the Jesus he worshiped. He took to heart the message:

³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Matthew 25:35-40 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Jesus has called us to radical love, without limit, without judgment, without conditions. It was the love expressed by a Belgian priest over 100 years ago, and one we are called to embrace if we are truly disciples of Jesus.

-Sara