

“I do choose” - meeting the God who is willing

Text: Mark 1:40-44

It's one of those stories that makes me smile.

It's one of those stories that gives us an image of Jesus that is attractive and compelling.

It's one of those stories that I wish more people would know about instead of slogans about what God hates on protest signs.

Which is why I think preachers like this story. And you've probably heard a sermon or done some bible study on Jesus healing the leper. So the challenge for some of us today is to read this story afresh. To imagine once again, what it would have been like. To meet Jesus again in this story and ask... what is it that You are trying to say to me? What is it that You are trying to us as a community?

So would you pray with me now? And ask simply, that Jesus our Lord, to meet us in the text.

We're still in the first chapter of Mark even though we're approaching March. We've been introduced to John the Baptist, Simon, Andrew, James and John and of course, the main subject of this gospel: Jesus of Nazareth. After spending some time alone praying, then going throughout the region of Galilee teaching in synagogues and casting out demons, Jesus is approached by a leper. The word for “leper” here was used to cover a range of chronic skin diseases, including our modern use of the term. So a man, with some sort of serious skin disease comes to Jesus, falls to his knees and says, “If you choose, you can make me clean.”

People were coming to Jesus with all sorts of needs. This man came with a desire to be made clean. What did he mean by this? What was the deal with being clean?

It goes back to the ritual purity laws outlined in Leviticus. We know through the story of Moses in Exodus, that God promised to the Israelites was that He would dwell among them. God's people were to have a special relationship with Him, and therefore they were to be Holy just as He was Holy (Lev. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7, 26). This was the fundamental demand of the levitical code.

But how could He be with them when they were, in reality, not Holy as He was Holy? How can an unHoly people be close to a Holy and righteous God? Faced with this problem, the Israelites needed to find a way to purify, sanctify, to cleanse their people of their sins. So they created an elaborate sacrificial system which historians and theologians are still scratching their heads over. What made some animals clean, and others unclean? What was the meaning behind the different offerings? While this system is pretty foreign to us now, the basic idea is familiar to us: sin, uncleanness, leads to death and separation from God. And some unclean things – in their understanding – could defile or contaminate what was clean just by proximity or being physically close.

We read in Leviticus:

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp (Lev 13:45-46).

[Discuss: who in our society we would call "unclean"? Who is ignored? Who is avoided?]

The priests would have declared this man, this leper, "unclean" before the people. He would have been living in separation and isolation. When he walked down the streets, the people would have moved away from him, and avoided looking at him in the eye. Certainly no one came into physical contact with him, or otherwise they would be defiled too.

Can you imagine? What life would have been like in this man's sandals? Not only did he have a disease to endure, but the pain of social ostracism, the pain of not-belonging anywhere, of not-belonging to anyone. How does one earn money? Find food? What happens to you when every encounter with another person is one of judgement and/or fear? What would it feel like to be continually despised and rejected through no fault of your own?

I'll tell you what happens: you feel un-human. You feel like a discardable object. Your identity

becomes shaped by how other people react to you, and you become known for what what you do not have but which everyone else does. You begin to hate yourself, perhaps hate others. You question the point of your miserable existence when there is no hope for any change. The only comfort, perhaps, is to be among those like yourself. Others that society have shunned and excluded. So you gather for companionship and protection... for survival.

But then hope comes. A man who is able to heal diseases and thus make one clean. And if one is clean.. then one can be acceptable before God and all people. It was a far-fetched hope, an impossible dream. Yet what would you have to lose? So in a last ditch effort you find this man and you fall to your knees and beg him:

“If you choose, you can make me clean.”

If you choose..

if you are willing...

If you so desire, Jesus, if you will...

you can make me clean.

The question was not if Jesus was able, the question was about what Jesus wanted. It wasn't about “could he?” it was about “would he?” Which tells us that this diseased man knew what Jesus was capable of. He has already heard the news, or perhaps have seen Jesus healing people and casting out demons. There was no doubt in his mind that Jesus could.

But would he?

The text says... Jesus was moved with compassion. Literally, the greek verb here means: “to be moved as to one's bowels,” (the bowels were thought to be the base of love and pity). We use the organ “heart” now to describe deep emotions. And so Jesus was moved from within, he was moved by this man's condition, his suffering, his years of external separation and internal torture. He was moved, I'm sure, by the very brokenness of creation. This wasn't how it should be.

I also wonder too, if Jesus knew that this man's experience will become his own. I wonder that when looking at this man, Jesus saw himself in a few year's time. Despised and rejected, abandoned to suffer alone. Compassion - to suffer with. Jesus understood, or at least, he would come to understand and experience that suffering himself.

So moved, Jesus stretches out his hand and touches him. Can you imagine what that meant to this man? The fact that someone actually physically touched him?

I've heard that one of the losses that seniors face is that of touch. When they're widowed and have no family around, and perhaps the only physical touch they receive is that of a nurse. The same could be said of anyone who lives in isolation or independently. Physical human touch becomes non-existent or rare. Yet few would argue how important human contact is for newborns and babies, when we are most vulnerable. Why do we think that as adults we no longer need human touch?

Jesus humanizes the leper with his touch. By touching him, Jesus acknowledges him and acknowledges his need. By touching him, Jesus was saying: you are no longer separated, cut off, forsaken. Jesus was saying: You are acceptable, you have dignity, and above all you are loved.

Jesus answers him: I do choose, be clean!

Jesus is willing, Jesus wants him to be clean and to be whole. And by this word, the man is made clean!

Isn't this the Jesus whom we long for? The Jesus that if we come to Him in desperate need, he will instantly answer and heal us from our sin and brokenness? We'll find ourselves completely whole and new, clean and washed white as snow? This is the Jesus I long for. Miracle worker, healer, compassionate God and King.

And yet, our normal experience doesn't quite match this scene. For one thing, we have no physical person to go to. Instead we kneel in church buildings and under crosses. We go to worship gatherings and conferences. We struggle to understand what it means to meet Christ as a body,

and also in the bread and wine.

We come to Him in prayer and confession. We come to Him as we read the psalms and say, "Give me clean heart, oh God, and renew a right spirit within me." We come to Him as we tell of our longings and losses to another – to share the burden of pain and grief that we carry with us so that we can know we are not alone. We cry out and we beg.

And we come to the second thing in our lives that is inconsistent with this text. The healing does not happen instantly. If anything, it is slow and incremental. Transformation looks more like a crawling tortoise than a frisky hare. And if healing does not come, does that mean Jesus isn't willing?

If anything, this is a story that invades our imagination about who God is. We are comforted and confronted by a compassionate, and willing, God. This is our Lord and Saviour, who touches the sick and heals them. This is Jesus who frees the demon-possessed. This is Jesus who cleanses a man not only of his leprosy and but of his exclusion from society and religion.

So what do we do when this image of God isn't matching our experience? There are no easy answers. It could be timing. It could be that God isn't willing to release us from suffering. It could be that there is more good happening in us when we suffer than if we are healed. But this isn't for me to answer. These are questions we bring to God.

I want to suggest though, that instead of asking, "why doesn't Jesus heal me?" we need to ask, "where do I stand before God?" For the idea of cleanliness for the leper was more than just the physical healing, but had social and spiritual implications too. We have the luxury, the blessing today of knowing that our physical state does not define our relationship or intimacy with God. Having a disease, having sickness or loss of physical abilities, does not separate us from God. More often, we separate ourselves, or we exclude others.

Where do we stand before God? Do we know that we are His children and that He is near? Do we know that it is not that we have to make ourselves clean before God so that we can approach him but that He has taken on our sins and brokenness so that He can dwell among us? Are we in right

relationship with Him?

Are with in right relationship with others?

This is an implication for us as we consider how we grow and serve our community.

Who is acceptable, who is welcomed into our homes, who will you share the Lord's supper with? For as a church, we meet at the Lord's table... when we partake of the bread and cup, we say we are one

In the gospels and the book of Acts, we see the beginnings of the church and it was radical not only because of the miracles and explosion of growth. But how they shared with one another as brothers and sisters. Jesus welcomed everybody from every walk of life. Can you imagine what it would have been like for Rabbis sharing meals with gentile prostitutes? Or slave owners breaking bread with their slaves? We see the start of this huge social shift with Jesus when he touches a leper. How would this look like today? Could you share the table with those who have insulted and hurt you? Could you share the table with your nannies or house-keepers? Could you share the Lord's meal with someone without a home, or with HIV, or who cleans floors?

We are confronted with a God who sees us as we are: broken and human. We are confronted with a God who is moved by suffering of those He loves. We are confronted with a God who desires relationship with us and so He will do whatever it takes to remove the separation between himself and his creation. This is His will.

What did Jesus mean when he sent the cleansed man to present himself to the priests as testimony? It was a not-so-subtle message to the religious elite: see, look at what God is doing. I believe that as a church, as we live out God's kingdom in radical ways, we are saying to the world – look at what God is doing and what He is able to do. He can change hearts. He is good news to the oppressed. He can bind up the brokenhearted, and give liberty to the captive. He will turn mourning into dancing and create beauty from ashes. He can make all things new.

Our God is able and willing. May it be so.