

Deep Compassion Meets Greatest Need

Mark 1:40-45

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A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.



I thank God for Jennifer, my wife. Her courageous and adventurous spirit has led me, invited me, sometimes dragged me to places where I would never have gone had she not been there. One of those places was India. And one of those places in India to which we traveled together was the Schieffelin Institute of Health - Research and Leprosy Centre at Karigiri Hospital in Vellore, South India. We visited this hospital and toured the facility there, meeting people from all walks of life who suffered from Hansen's disease, more commonly known as leprosy. We saw their skin being eaten away and their deformed fingers and toes. We also saw a dedicated group of doctors and nurses treating these patients and helping them to be reunited with their families and rehabilitated for work in their communities.

The story of leprosy over time is a harsh one, but one with saintly stories. A Catholic priest, known as Father Damien, served a leprosy colony on the island of Moloka'i in Hawaii in the mid 19th century. He lived and worked with people with Hansen's disease, ultimately coming down with the disease and dying from it at the age of 49. He has since been canonized in the Roman Catholic Church.

The gospel lesson today from the Gospel of Mark presents us with a healing story. Jesus was a healer. His ministry was a mixture of healing and teaching. One aspect of his ministry was inextricably linked to the other. When he taught he healed. When he healed he taught. On this occasion, an unnamed man with a skin disease identified as leprosy comes to Jesus for help. He is begging. He kneels. He says: "If

you choose, you can make me clean.” Already we have a great deal of information from which to form some opinion of what is taking place. We know that having this type of skin disease is a death sentence. It kills the body and it separates the person from the wider community because of the laws of “cleanliness” – the Holiness Code described in the Book of Leviticus. This person is unclean and not welcome in acceptable society. He would live on the perimeter, on the edge, on the margins of communal life.

We also know that he has a belief that Jesus can heal him. “If you choose” is what he says. There is no explanation of how he came to this belief. We can surmise that he saw some miracle performed by Jesus. We can guess that he is being led by the Holy Spirit to seek out this holy man. Whatever the case, this unnamed man believes his deliverance is standing in front of him in the person of Jesus.

And what about Jesus; how is he affected, influenced by this encounter? The report says: Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” The words, “moved with pity,” can also be translated, “deeply moved”, and even “moved with anger.” What is clear is that Jesus is focused on this man and his plight. He is not just working the crowd like a politician on a rope line. He is engaged on a visceral level with this man. He sees him.

Really seeing someone is a powerful thing. It is life-changing; both for the one who sees and the one who is seen.

My valentine, Jennifer, sees me like this and I thank God for her. Two weeks ago, on Ground Hog’s Day, she knew I was tired. I had two meetings at church that evening. So when I got home she had a movie all set up for me to watch on Netflix. It was the movie Ground Hog Day with Bill Murray. I highly recommend it. In this movie, the main character is caught in a time loop, reliving Ground Hog Day, February 2nd, over and over again. The man is a schmuck. But, to cut to the chase, by the end of the movie, the man is transformed to being a sensitive, loving, compassionate human being. He has had an eternity of Ground Hog Days to get it right, to begin to see himself and other people around him for who they really are, or perhaps, who God sees them to be, although God is not mentioned by name.

The thing about Jesus is that he gets it right the first time. He sees clear to the heart of things from the heart of God. He sees the man with the skin disease. He sees the unjust social contract that excludes people from society by the discrimination of a sickness that has no rhyme or reason for existing. He sees the man in front of him who has such a deep need for healing, and who recognizes the capacity of Jesus to heal, yet who places the power (the choice) into the hands of the one who is acceptable in society’s eyes. Yes, Jesus. The man knows that Jesus will be seen as unclean himself

if he gets too intimately involved with a leper. And Jesus makes his decision: "I do choose. Be made clean!"

The healing event does not stop there, however. Jesus says to the man to go to the priest and do what must be done to be reconciled with the community. That is what I love about Jesus. He gets righteously angry about how people treat other people but he does not hold it against us. Rather he keeps turning us back toward God, all of us, even those of us who have made these awful rules and laws and customs that would set some of us up as better than others, as more acceptable by God.

Teaching and healing; healing and teaching. Again and again Jesus points the way to how God would have us live in community with one another. Last week we sang a song using the words of Micah the prophet: *What does the Lord require of you? What does the Lord require of you? Justice, kindness, walk humbly with your God. To seek justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God.*

Here is another way to look at what it means to be a disciple. It is a quote from the Presbyterian minister and author, Frederick Buechner:

"Neither the hair shirt or the soft birth will do. The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger. The intersection of who God has called you to be, who God created you to be, along with the way the world is, in all its beauty and its brokenness. This is the holy way upon which all of us are invited to travel.

We all know the need. It is right before us and not so deep within us. We know how we have been blind to the person who is unclean in our upbringing, who does not look like us, act like us, think like us, or speak like us. The teaching is here and the healing will happen. If you choose. If we choose. The lesson of Jesus, his deep pity, his compassion, his righteous anger, is within us and will serve us well as we seek to see injustice and the full humanity of each person and all people. The love of God will never let us go and always call us back to the fullness of what it means to be accepted and whole.

Thanks be to God. Amen.