

“The Healing Touch”
Sermon for January 21, 2024
First Congregational Church, Stockbridge, MA
The Rev. Dr. Richard Floyd

SCRIPTURE READING: Mark 1:40-45

40 A man with a skin disease came to him, and kneeling, he said to him, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” 41 Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” 42 Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 44 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.” 45 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.”

SERMON: “The Healing Touch” The Rev. Dr. Richard Floyd

Prayer: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last week Pastor Brent drew attention to the excitement and constant activity of Jesus we see in Mark’s Gospel, especially here at the beginning of his ministry. There is an urgency to the story. The word *immediately* is used some 40 times. In fact, it’s used twice in these five verses we have today -- *immediately* and *at once* -- same word in Greek.

So, in today’s reading we’re not even out of the first chapter of Mark yet and Jesus has been baptized, he’s been tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he’s exorcised a demoniac, and he’s healed Peter’s mother-in-law.

Which is to say Jesus is a busy guy, and he’s also a big deal, because crowds – big crowds -- of people flock to be with him. If you think about it, it is remarkable that in a time before mass communication, word could go out, and great crowds could gather. There was no TV, no newspapers, no internet. And the many people who sought Jesus out recognized him as someone in authority right from the beginning, recognized his ability to meet them in their need, to heal them, to fix them, to feed them.

And so it is, in today’s story about the cleansing of a man with leprosy. And I quite intentionally describe him as “a man who has leprosy” rather than a leper, which is what the scripture says -- he’s a leper. Because, you know, today we’re very conscious that people are not defined by their disabilities. I have a disability and it does not define me.

But the truth is, before this man meets Jesus, he is a leper, his disease does define him in several significant ways. First of all, he has a loathsome skin disease. He’s hard to look at, much less to touch.

Secondly, the law of Moses, which is his community's rule book, has defined him as someone unclean in Leviticus chapter 13 and 14. It talks all about skin diseases and what you have to do. And so it condemns him to social isolation, so he's not just got a medical condition, he also has a social condition that's been put on him by his community. He's ritually unclean, a category we don't really understand in our time. Anyone who touches him becomes ritually unclean. Not only is his leprosy contagious, his uncleanness is contagious. He has to live outside the town gates. He is required by Law, whenever he moves about around people, to announce that he is unclean. He has to shout "unclean, unclean" as he moves about other people. But though the Law can separate him to protect other people, it cannot make him clean. It cannot cleanse him. It cannot heal him.

And, finally, to add insult to injury, in the time in which he lived in the ancient world, people were blamed for their disease, for their affliction. They believed they had this affliction because of something they did, some sin. So on top of everything else, all the other indignities, he's seen as a sinner. In short, the leper was a kind of a walking dead man, socially. The rabbis at that time said that it was easier to raise the dead than to cleanse a leper. So, it is not inaccurate to say that he was defined by his affliction. He was a leper. He was quite literally untouchable. Untouchable.

And he approaches Jesus and he beseeches him to cleanse him. Notice that he forgoes the legally required shout of "unclean, unclean." Again, there's an urgency here. He needs to get to Jesus. And the emotional urgency of the leper's approach shows his desperation at his plight. He kneels at Jesus's feet, and says "If you will, you can make me clean." He believes in Jesus's authority to cleanse him.

One of the major important themes in Mark's Gospel is what is called "the messianic secret." In other words, Jesus's identity as the expected Jewish Messiah is hidden from most people. And Jesus asks those he cleanses, heals and cures, to keep it to themselves, which is kind of ironic given that he's done it in front of big crowds. But why is this? In time Jesus's true identity will only be revealed by his resurrection and known only in his cross. But in the meantime, some do recognize his true identity, or at least his authority. Most, however, do not, including his own disciples, who are pretty clueless, really, in Mark. Which kind of gives me hope, because we're disciples too. But who recognizes him? The demons do, the demons recognize Jesus, and many who suffer from afflictions recognize him out of their need.

And that is the case with this man afflicted with leprosy. He drops to his knees and says to Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean."

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and did the unthinkable -- he touched him. He touched the untouchable. And immediately -- there's that word again -- immediately he was cleansed. Immediately he was cleansed. Jesus said, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

Was it pity for the man, or was it anger? As some of you know, I lead a Zoom Bible study every Wednesday at 1:00, a great group of people, and you'd be welcome to join us. We talked about this text and, you know, in the earliest church everything was a manuscript, it was written by hand. And so there's variants in early manuscripts. The Bible we used today picked *pity*, but

there's an earlier variant that says *anger*. Well, what would he be angry about? He's not angry at the leper. No, he's angry that the world has so much brokenness, is so at odds with the intentions of the Creator. Either way, pity or anger, it was an act of compassion. Compassion means literally a sharing of suffering. Jesus shares the suffering of the leper. And remember that Jesus himself was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." (Isaiah 53)

So Jesus sternly warns the man to say nothing and to report to the priest as required by the Law. That's an interesting feature. Report to the priest as prescribed by the Jewish Law. So Jesus is not abrogating the law here. Remember how he said, "I have come not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it." (Mt 5:17)

But the man, no longer a leper, whose life was given back to him from being a walking dead man, could not contain himself, and he went and he told everybody, he shouted it, he proclaimed it. He witnessed to it that he had been a walking dead man and now he was a whole person, his life was handed back to him. Not only was he cleansed from his medical disease, he was freed and liberated from his social isolation. He'd been touched. And the word about his healing got around and the crowds swelled so that Jesus could no longer go into town openly.

It is a wonderful story, just five verses, but there's a lot packed into it.

What are some of the takeaways for us?

The first for me is that God meets us in our need. My friend Tony Robinson tells a story about James Forbes, who was a wonderful Pastor of Riverside Church in New York. Sarah and Michael had him as their pastor for many years. A really wonderful human being. He also taught homiletics – which is fancy seminary talk for preaching -- at Union Theological Seminary, and my friend Tony had him as a teacher. Forbes came out of the Pentecostal tradition of the Black Church. Tony asked him once why the Black Church's worship had so much more vitality than the White Church. And if you've ever worshipped in a Black church, you know what I'm talking about. James Forbes said, "Well, I'll tell you. Folks in the White Church think God needs them, whereas in the Black Church we know we need God." God meets us in our need.

Secondly, the healing touch of Jesus manifests the power of God. The Doctrine of the Incarnation won't be developed for another few centuries from this story, but don't we see here the power of God manifested in the human healing touch of the man Jesus. Jesus is channeling, manifesting, the very power of God.

Third, Jesus breaks down all kinds of barriers that separate people. In his own time, he broke down the barrier between Jew and Gentile, which is a big barrier. And in our time, he breaks down barriers as well. According to the Law, Jesus should have become unclean by touching the leper, right? That's the way it works. The unclean person makes the person that touches him unclean. But it didn't work that way. In an amazing reversal, Jesus touches the man and the man becomes clean. Jesus breaks through the boundaries that separate the "clean" from the "unclean." What the Law could not do, Jesus did quite easily, with just a human touch. In Romans 8:3, Paul writes, "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own

Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.” Jesus is the incarnate manifestation of the love and power and authority of the living Creator God.

Fourth, Jesus came especially for those in the margins of society. A book that has been very influential to my understanding of Jesus and his gospel is Howard Thurman’s “Jesus and the Disinherited,” which I really recommend to you. Brent gave it to me several summers ago. Howard Thurman was born in the segregated South of the Jim Crow era. His grandmother was a slave. She couldn’t read, so he read the Bible out loud to her. “Jesus and the Disinherited” was published in 1949, the year I was born. Imagine that! Thurman became the Dean of the Chapel at Boston University. He traveled to India to meet with Gandhi and to study non-violent resistance to injustice. One of his students at Boston University was a young Baptist preacher named – wait for it -- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Here is a quote from Thurman’s book: “The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish thinker and teacher appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed. That it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus. 'In him was life; and the life was the light of men.' Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.”

Howard Thurman understood that the disinherited lived on the margins of society. He recognized that racial segregation was a great evil, whereby both the victim and the victimizer were deprived of a relationship that could set them both free from their respective bondage.

One of the things we are doing when we gather here for worship is to be a community of compassion. Remember how I said compassion literally means to share suffering with each other, and not just suffering, but in Paul’s words “to weep with those weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.” And we do it in the name and Spirit of Jesus, both the earthly Jesus who cleansed the man with leprosy and the Risen Christ who lives among us still, and is the head of the Church, which is his body.

As a community of compassion, we pray with and for each other. It is why we have a meal train for our members and a community pop-up pantry for our neighbors. It’s why we do a lot of what we do. It’s to put into practice what we learn from Jesus’ own compassion, to be a community of compassion. And by being a community of compassion, we also model for the larger world, the larger society, how to live with our neighbors, how to be together.

A friend of mine suggests that too many in our time view the world as a battlefield, a war between good and evil. And of course we’re always on the good side, right? And I have to say it is tempting to see the world that way. But he suggested to me that a better model is to see the world as a hospital, where everyone in need of healing can come. And that’s everyone. Everyone. All of us, whether we are medically ill or not, have places in our lives that need fixing, broken relationships, family estrangements, addictions, compulsions, alienations.

So, what barriers need to be overcome, what breaches repaired that you can think of, perhaps between Red States and Blue States, between the races, between the sexes, between the rich and the poor, the disinherited and the privileged?

Perhaps we all need to get in touch with our inner leper, our inner leper, the places where we are on the margins, or where we have cast others into the margins.

The Good News -- and we always come here to hear good news, that's really what it's all about -- the good news, and it is really good news, is that our God meets us in our brokenness, in all the places that need fixing, and in our need. And his son Jesus, who breaks down all barriers, heals us with a touch. Amen.