

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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2 Kings 5:1-14 (NRSV)

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. [2] Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. [3] She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." [4] So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. [5] And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. [6] He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." [7] When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

[8] But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." [9] So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. [10] Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." [11] But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! [12] Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. [13] But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" [14] So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Mark 1:40-45 (NRSV)

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, 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.

LEPROSY

A leper came to Jesus. He wanted to be healed. Many of us have heard about leprosy; we've heard many sermons about how in the ancient world it was an incurable, deadly disease. In addition to this, leprosy was often misdiagnosed and some people with skin problems were treated as if they were lepers.

It didn't make any difference if you had the disease or not. If people thought you were a leper, you lived like a leper. You were forcibly removed from family and friends. You could not come close to anyone. It must have been an extremely lonely and frightening experience.

I was listening to a news report this past week about the leper colony they had on one of the islands of Hawaii. People from all over the country and from all walks of life were shipped away from home to live on this remote island. They were forced to grow their own food because ships could not even dock on the rugged coastline.

Now we know that it was not necessary. Leprosy is not that contagious. Only five to seven percent of the population can even get it. Leprosy is

treatable with commonly available drugs. And, here's the kicker, some of the people who were confined to that island didn't even have the disease.

SYMBOLIC LEPERS

I think there's a reason that leprosy is mentioned so much in the Bible. It was more than a disease. It was a symbolic way of talking about a common theological problem. It was a way of talking about how we keep people at arm's length because they are different; leprosy is a way of talking about how fear overcomes faith and hope.

We might not worry about leprosy any more, but there are still lepers among us. Every one of us is afraid to touch someone. The reasons vary, but the problem is still the same.

A man who had just lost a job said, "The hardest part of this whole thing has been the loneliness." His pastor replied, "You mean the loneliness of not going to work and seeing people?"

And he replied, "No, the loneliness of friends avoiding me, people not coming around to seem any more." The pastor asked, "Why would they do that?" And the man said, "I'm not sure, but I think their attitude is, 'I don't want to catch what he's got.'"

When a person loses their spouse to death, they are often ostracized by their former friends who are still a couple. It's not something that happens on purpose, but it does happen. I've talked to more than one widow or widower who was very bitter about this. They say something like, "I guess you don't know who your friends are sometimes."

I think that one of the reasons widows and widowers are sometimes ostracized is that their friends who are still a couple are scared to death by the pain and suffering that their friends are enduring. And they don't want that pain to rub off on them. Every time they see this lonely widow or widower,

they are forced to consider the temporary nature of their own life and their own marriage. And out of fear some of these “friends” run away.

When I first became a minister, I was frightened to be with people as they died. The pain of friends and relatives can be overwhelming. And sometimes that pain “rubs off.” The temptation was to say a few words, say a prayer and get out of that difficult place.

But, by the grace of God I learned that you can touch the “leper.” By the grace of God I learned that you can touch that part of life that we are most afraid to name or think about, that final enemy who takes away everything that we love and is precious in life. We can touch even death and dying because we have a Savior who has touched it as well and through his touching brought us a hope that transcends even death.

PREJUDICE AND FEAR

Fear, of course, is at the heart of prejudice and why we keep certain people at arms length. Some of us are afraid to touch people who are of a different race or people who are gay or lesbian. Some of us are afraid to touch people who speak a different language. Some of us are afraid to touch Muslims or people who belong to what we consider a “scary” religion.

Some of us are afraid to touch charismatic, evangelical Christians. And some are afraid to touch liberal, mainline Christians. Some of us are afraid to touch Republicans, and some of us are afraid to touch Democrats!

I think as a matter of faith, as a matter of following Jesus, we have to expand our ability to touch those who stir up our fears. I think that in order to follow Jesus we have to bring those who have been far away closer.

Indeed, that’s one way to look at the ministry of Jesus. He had the courage to touch everyone in the name of God, and in many different ways that always brought healing and hope.

MOTIVATED BY ANGER

According to biblical law, the man with leprosy was unclean. He could have no contact with those who were clean.

But, when the man saw Jesus, he was so overcome by the possibility of deliverance, that he broke the law. He came close to Jesus. He fell at Jesus' feet and said, "If you will, you can make me clean."

And how did Jesus respond to the leper's plea? As an actor might ask: What was Jesus' motivation?

In most of our Bibles, we read that Jesus was motivated by compassion or pity. Actually, the Greek word is a very graphic word that means Jesus had his stomach tied in a knot by what he saw.

This was a word often used when Jesus looked up the needs of those who were sick or grieving. Jesus did not wave a magic wand and cure people from afar. Jesus reached out and touched people in a very human way. And yet, this human touch was the very hand of God.

But, this week I learned that we may have the wrong word when it comes to Jesus' motivation for healing, at least in this case.

Some early manuscripts use a completely different word, and most modern scholars think that this word was in the original text of Mark's gospel. It's a word that means anger. When Jesus looked at this poor, isolated man he was filled with anger. His heart was filled with rage.

WHY ANGER?

You can see why many were reluctant to use this particular text. It creates problems. First of all, we never like to think of Jesus ever showing that volatile human emotion of anger. We like Jesus to be that meek and mild figure who never said a discouraging word. And second, anger just doesn't

seem to make sense in this story. Why in the world would Jesus feel rage? Compassion we can understand but anger is a much more difficult emotion to fathom in this case.

Was Jesus angry because the leper was breaking the law? The leper had gotten too close. He had stepped over the boundary between the clean and the unclean.

But, Jesus could not have been angry at the leper for breaking of the law. If Jesus was angry about that, he could have merely moved farther away from the leper and perhaps even pronounced a curse on him as was common in those days.

Jesus didn't do that. In his anger, in his stomach churning state, Jesus responded to the leper's plea by saying, "I am willing to heal you." And then Jesus reached out and touched him.

I don't think Jesus' anger was directed at the leper. I think Jesus was angry at what this sickness had done to this man. I think Jesus was angry at how his body had been ravaged. But, most of all, I think Jesus was angry at how this man had been isolated from the human community.

Jesus' was angry because this was not how it was supposed to be. This was not life as God intended it. Evil had invaded God's good creation.

Quite often when I counsel with people whose lives have been invaded by a terrible disease, they are angry. They ask me and God and no one in particular, "Why did this happen to me?"

Of course, one answer to that question is another question, "Why not me?" We are all mortal and subject to the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." Others might offer a slightly different answer. They might say that this is "God's will" for you at this time and that you just have to accept it.

NOT GOD'S PLAN

But, the anger of Jesus suggests a third response to the person who is enduring great suffering. Maybe God doesn't like it either! Maybe this is not a part of God's plan! Maybe God is angry with us because his good creation has been distorted in some way.

The insurance folks talk about natural disasters as "acts of God" but more and more we are learning that distortions in natural world are quite often not so much an act of God, but a result evil in the world.

For example, last week the missionary for Madagascar told us how vast portions of that island are practically uninhabitable because of the deforestation in that country. Due to economic injustice and exploitation, God's good creation is marred, and people suffer because of it. That's a reason to be angry.

Many of our diseases are caused because we harm ourselves or others. We use chemicals and processes that are known to be dangerous. But, in order to make the almighty dollar or give ourselves the temporary pleasure, we mar God's good creation. That brings sickness and pain into the world, and that's a reason to be angry.

Do you remember the other time Jesus was angry? It was what we commonly refer to as the cleaning of the temple. On that occasion Jesus got so angry that he kicked over the tables of the money changers and took a whip and drove them out of the temple.

What made Jesus so mad? Jesus said that they had transformed God's temple into a "den of thieves." Jesus was mad because evil had intruded into God's good world. It had made what should have been a house of prayer for all people into a house of commerce for just few.

The leper cried, "Make me clean." But, he was asking for more than just physical healing. His cry was also for acceptance by his fellow human beings. The leper wanted to be fully human again. The leper was asking

what we ask every time we say the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." He was pleading for the kingdom of God and the blessings of heaven to come into his life. And he wanted that kingdom to come right away.

IN TOUCH WITH THE COMMUNITY

And Jesus, moved by anger at the injustice of it all, did something. He reached out and touched the man and healed him.

But, Jesus went beyond just touching the leper and making him whole. Jesus put him back in touch with the human community that had abandoned him.

Jesus told the man to go show himself to the religious authorities (who doubled as the health department in those days) and tell them what had happened. Tell them that there's a new power in this world that changes everything. The old rules will no longer work. The world can no longer be divided into clean and unclean, black and white, male and female, straight and gay, Christian and Muslim, red states and blue states.

In those days the religious leaders saw it as their job to keep the undesirables at arm's length. They created the rules and regulations of society. They put limits on God's grace by their use of the law. But, what Jesus was saying, in this touching and healing of this unclean man that "there's a new sheriff in town." Things are going to be different in the kingdom of God as revealed in my ministry. There will be no "untouchables" in this kingdom that comes.

And you know what ... I think God in Christ is telling us the very same thing even today.

In our country religious and political leaders have become obsessed with securing our borders and keeping the undesirable person at arm's length. But, that does not square with God's word nor does it square with the deepest core values of our country. Do you know what is written on the Statue of

Liberty? It's a poem entitled "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus. Let me read it to you.

"Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips, "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

My friends, that's who we are called to be. Some people say that the United States is a Christian nation. If we are a Christian nation, then we are called to touch others and welcome others into our lives in the name of Christ. Let others erect barriers if they must, but we cannot do it. The Christian faith is about tearing down barriers. The Christian faith is about touching even those that we fear the most.

One of the things that I love the most about this congregation is that we are quite different. In this congregation you will find black, brown, white and all shades in between. You will find "died in the wool" Republicans and Democrats. We all speak with an accent of one sort or another. But, despite our differences, we worship a common Lord, a Lord who calls us to reach out and touch the one who remains on the outside.

DON'T TELL

Jesus did that. He touched the leper. He told him to go to the religious authorities so that he might be reinstated into the human community. But,

then Jesus told the leper to do something else. He told the leper not to tell anyone else. And that's the one thing the leper did not do. Why couldn't the leper do as Jesus asked?

Sometimes we get news that is so good that we just can't keep it to ourselves.

The joy of the moment is expressed well by the anthem that the choir sang [will sing] today. "I am alive and I can see." Another song that comes to mind is "He Touched Me." "He touched me ... and oh the joy that floods my soul ... something happened and now I know. He touched me and made me whole."

If ever there was a time for an upbeat proclamation of the good news, it was then. The man's gratitude and joy just spilled over into witness. And so all the people in the whole area learned what had happened. And they all sought Jesus.

And you know what happened? Jesus became a leper of sorts. A once trapped man is now free to go where he wants and enjoy human companionship, but Jesus is now isolated, apart from the city. Now Jesus is forced to stay in the countryside.

When Jesus touched the leper, he not only healed a man, he also directly confronted evil. Jesus confronted an evil system, and it cost him big time. It first cost him the freedom to come and go as he pleased. And in the end it finally cost Jesus his life. The person who insists on inviting everyone in, the person who insists on touching lepers at every turn is, in the final analysis a dangerous person to those who want to control society.

A COSTLY TOUCH

If we become disciples of Jesus Christ, if we dare to touch the untouchable, don't think that we will get off Scott free. We will be called upon to sacrifice as well.

What's that phrase that people like to use in regard to the military? Freedom is never free. Well, that's what we believe about the Christian faith. In Christ we are free. But, it is a freedom that only comes when we are willing to make sacrifices on his behalf.

Several months ago I did a funeral for a woman who used to attend this church. There wasn't much family. She never married, and the services were arranged by a nephew from San Francisco. He spoke during the service, and I began to appreciate the life that this woman had lived.

She first came to this area to take care of her ailing parents. Soon after the parents died her sister died, leaving a young boy, a baby. The dying wish of her sister was that she take care of her son. This she did. In fact all of her life she scheduled vacation so that she could be with her nephew and his wife. Sometimes she would go to San Francisco. Sometimes they would come to Kissimmee.

Some would say that she missed out on a lot in life. She was never married. She never had children of her own. But, her willingness to sacrifice, to reach out and touch those who needed her made a difference in many lives. That nephew she raised is now a successful executive with a famous company. But, more than that, he is a gracious person who is grateful for the healing touch of his aunt.

A friend told of a man in his church who recently donated one of his kidneys to save the life of his brother who was dying of kidney failure. Of course the brother has two kidneys and was able to make the donation. But, the donor brother now has a life that is more restricted. He will have to take drugs to offset the loss of his kidneys.

Rarely does an act of goodness come without a cost. If you touch a leper, if you get angry at a world in which there is no compassion, there will be consequences. It certainly happened that way with Jesus. When he faced the evil of this world, he didn't write a theology book or book about the origins of social problems.

Jesus got involved. Jesus touched people as only a human being can. And in that very human touch, the world saw a hope that only God can bring.

Who are you afraid to touch?
That is the very person you must touch.

Strangely enough salvation is not found in the comfortable life we want. Salvation is found in the lonely life that makes us afraid. Salvation is found in the wilderness. That's where we find Jesus in our lesson for today. And that's where we will always find Jesus.

Jesus tells us.
Don't be afraid. Reach out and touch.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN