

Mark 1:40-45

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.

## A PASSIONATE STORY

When we read Mark’s gospel in English it almost sounds like it was written by Joe Friday of Dragnet fame. His famous line was “just the facts.” We’ve heard this story so much that we can almost yawn and say, “Okay, Jesus healed another person. What else is new?”

But, what seems like a matter of fact story in English sounds a lot different in the original language. The Greek is filled with emotionally charged words.

We need to hear the passion of the words and see the amazing drama that is taking place in our lesson for today. This is no ho-hum let’s heal another guy moment. This is a pivotal moment in the ministry of Jesus. This one act says a lot about who Jesus claimed to be and what the kingdom of God is all about.

So come with me this morning into another world, a world in which modern medicine does not exist, a world where judgment and fear reign. Hear the desperation and the plea of man who was isolated from everyone and everything he ever loved. A “leper” came to Jesus, got down on his knees and begged to be healed.

## SCALY AND ROUGH PEOPLE

What did it mean to be a leper, and why was he on his knees begging to be healed? Most scholars agree that the term “leprosy” in the ancient world referred to a number of skin diseases. In fact the word leprosy literally means “scaly” or “rough”. There are a lot of things that can cause our skin to be scaly or rough.

In some cases leprosy was indeed a deadly disease that disfigured people in a terrible way. But, in other cases “leprosy” was nothing more than a common skin disease. In that regard some of us are lucky to be born in the modern world. Who knows? With my bad skin I probably would have been diagnosed as a leper in the ancient world!

(Can you imagine being treated like a leper because you had a skin rash? Talk about the “heartbreak of psoriasis” that would be it!)

In the ancient world, it didn't make any difference if you really had leprosy 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.

More than this, there was a moral stigma imposed upon lepers. People reasoned that if someone had something this bad happen to them, they must have done something to deserve it. This was a common theological assumption in Jesus' day.

You might remember a story from the Bible when Jesus and his disciples came across a man who was born blind. The disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned—the man or his parents?"

In Jesus' day sin supposedly caused sickness. People got what they deserved.

So lepers were not only shunned because of their illness; they were also shunned because they were thought to be morally corrupt.

#### THE WORD MADE FLESH

I think there's a reason that Jesus' healing of the leper plays such a prominent role in the gospels. Leprosy was the sum all fears. The rabbis thought that leprosy was well nigh incurable. They said that it would be easier to raise the dead than cure a leper. Having leprosy was worse than death.

And so, if Jesus could cure a leper, what do you think the people would say about him? If Jesus could cure a leper, that would be a unique event. It would be something that only God could do. Exactly. That is the point of the healing. Jesus did what only God could do.

But, why did Jesus cure him the way he cured him? Why did Jesus touch the leper who had come too close for comfort? After all, if Jesus touched the leper, the law said that Jesus would be unclean too. Touching the leper involved great risk. And yet it was the touch of Jesus that is the pivotal detail in this story.

I would suggest that it was not only the power of God that healed the leper; it was also the power of the human touch. Jesus was God, but Jesus was also God in the flesh.

The human face of God plays a big role in this miracle. And in that sense it provides us with an example. The human touch can do more than we imagine.

#### PEOPLE WHO NEED TO BE TOUCHED

We might not have lepers among us, but we do have people who need to be touched. We might not have lepers among us, but we do have people that we keep at arm's length because they are different from us in some way. I wonder if one of our jobs as disciples of Jesus might be to touch someone, someone that we might be afraid to touch.

Every one of us is afraid to touch someone. We all have our lists of lepers, those “rough and scaly” people that we don’t want to touch. The reasons vary, but the problem is still the same.

Let me give you an example. When a person loses their spouse to death, their former friends who are still a couple often ostracize them.

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 brought this up at one of our Bible studies and had a hard time getting them back to the Scripture. No one disagreed with me. In fact they told story after emotion filled story about their struggle to rebuild their lives. They did indeed feel like lepers.

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.

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 who speak a different language. Some of us are afraid to touch Muslims or people who belong to what we consider a “scary” religion. Think of any person that has been marginalized by society, and that is someone that Jesus wants us to touch.

### A TOUCH OF CONTROVERSY

In order to follow Jesus we have to bring those who have been far away close. We may not be able to heal like Jesus, but we can reach out and touch like Jesus. But, be warned. When we touch the untouchables there is always a price to pay.

The touch of Jesus healed people. But, the touch of Jesus also created conflict. When you touch the untouchables you are challenging the deeply held beliefs of the status quo.

According to biblical law, the man with leprosy was unclean. He could have no contact with those on the outside who were deemed to be clean. In fact it was illegal for him to come too close. No one wanted what he had to rub off.

But, when the man saw Jesus, he was so overcome by the possibility of being saved from this horrible life, 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? Jesus touched him. Why did Jesus do that? What motivated Jesus to break the law and touch this desperate man?

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 upon the needs of those who were sick or grieving. Jesus did not wave a magic wand and cure people from afar. Jesus had a gut reaction to those in pain, and he reached out and touched those who were in pain.

Jesus reached out and touched people in a very human way. And yet, in this human touch people experienced the very hand of God.

### A TOUCH OF ANGER

In my study this week I learned that we might 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. No you can see why we have often used the word that means compassion instead of the word that means anger. Compassion is easier to understand in this context.

But, suppose that was the word that Mark used. Why was Jesus angry? He certainly wasn't angry that the man came near. If he were angry with that he could have told him in no uncertain terms (as most other people would have done) to go away.

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. And 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. And God in Christ was angry about it. God in Christ was out to change things.

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

Of course, one way to answer that question is with another question, "Why not me?" We are all mortal. We are all subject to the problems of life. It rains on the just and the unjust alike.

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.

Now I do think that God can work through difficult situations for a greater good. But, to say that God causes those situations might be going too far.

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 because his good creation has been distorted in some way, and this has caused needless suffering.

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 of our own careless or even evil actions.

For example, deforestation can cause a previously fertile area to become a desert. Injustice and exploitation of the poor can cause people to suffer. Wars and the desire of despots to remain in control can cause misery on a national scale.

We see examples of this daily on the evening news. 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 by pollution or self-abuse. We use chemicals and processes that are known to be dangerous.

But, in order to make the almighty dollar or give ourselves temporary pleasure, we mar God's good creation. That brings sickness and pain into the world, and that's a reason to be angry.

Actually, I think both words fit in this context. Sometimes compassion is motivated by a just anger.

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

#### A TOUCH THAT RESTORES COMMUNITY

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

Jesus told the man to 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 apply. The world can no longer be neatly divided into clean and unclean.

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, Jesus sent this man to the priests not only to fulfill the law, so that he might be declared clean. The Scripture tells us that Jesus also sent this man to the priests as a “testimony to them.” The healing of the leper was a lesson about the kingdom of God, and the religious leaders needed to learn that lesson more than most. There will be no “untouchables” in this kingdom that comes. God in Christ can make us all clean.

We know that. But, sometimes we don’t live that.

And so, from time to time Jesus sends someone into our lives to remind us. We become too comfortable with our own way of thinking and our own prejudices. And so God sends us the leper who has been cleansed. God sends us the untouchable who has been touched and healed by the power of God’s grace.

Jesus touched the leper, and Jesus told him to go to the religious authorities so that he might be reinstated into the human community. This healing was a sign of God’s kingdom. It was an opportunity for the religious leaders to learn about the amazing grace of God.

#### A COSTLY TOUCH

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. Instead of following Jesus’ strict commands he went out and told everyone.

Why couldn’t the leper do as Jesus asked? I guess we’ll never know for sure. I suspect that the leper was so overcome with joy that he had to tell someone.

You know how it is. Sometimes we get news that is so good that we just can’t keep it to ourselves. Whenever I read this story I think of that gospel song, “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.”

That was the message of the leper, and it was a message that resonated with the people. People from all around heard the story. And they wanted to come and see Jesus. They wanted Jesus to touch them and change them in some way.

And do 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. Healing did not come without cost, and it was Jesus who paid the price.

When Jesus touched the leper, he not only healed a man, he also directly confronted evil. Jesus confronted an evil system based upon ignorance and prejudice, 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 HIGH COST OF HEALING

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 the powers that be. 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 too will be called upon to sacrifice.

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. Healing came at a high cost.

Rarely does an act of compassion come without a high price. 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. It will be that way with us.

When Jesus faced the evil of this world, he didn't write a theology book or deliver a lecture about the origin 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.

## AFRAID TO TOUCH

A minister tried to encourage a person who was going through a tough time. Her personal life was out of control. She lurched from one relationship to the next. She had issues with addiction and depression.

Over time the pastor came to believe that what she most needed was an outlet for her talent and energy. So, he suggested that she reach out and touch someone. He said,

"Your life isn't going to get better with your sitting here in your expensive home, worrying about your aches and pains. Jesus teaches that in giving we receive. Jesus believes that you have been given gifts that can help in the healing of others, and, as you give, you will be healed."

How did she respond? "Look, I'm a well-educated modern person. Do you really think that some ancient teacher who lived in an insignificant corner of the world in the first century has anything to teach me? My problems are complicated. I need more than this simplistic 'love your neighbor' stuff."

That's what many people believe. They think that they need more than the touch of Jesus. But, the touch of Jesus is the only thing that can heal us.

And where do we find this Jesus? We find him when we touch another human being in his name. Strangely enough salvation is not found in the comfortable life we want. Salvation is found in a life of service and sacrifice.

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. The human touch is filled with divine power."

#### TOUCHED BY A LEPER

Let me close with my favorite story about the touch of Jesus. You may remember it. I've used it before, but no matter how many times I tell this story it still lifts me up.

Arnold Lovell was the pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, WV. He received a call to come to the home of some members who didn't attend very often. The husband had died, and Arnold was going to do the funeral.

While at the home, Arnold learned for the first time that the couple had a 42-year-old son with severe disabilities. Doctors had earlier estimated his mental capacity to be that of a five year old. It was decided that the son would be unable to handle the death of his father so they didn't tell him.

About two weeks later Arnold got a second call. The mother had also died, and it was the pastor's task to explain this to the son. After consulting with a developmental disability expert and with much fear, the pastor went to the home to try and explain what happened to the man with a boy's mind.

He began, "Ronnie, you know that your father has been gone." "Yes." "Well, I'm afraid that I've got some bad news. He's dead." Ronnie replied, "Daddy's dead. Yes, I know."

And then the pastor continued, "You know your mom has been sick." "Yes. She's in the hospital." "Ronnie, your mom is dead too."

At that Ronnie broke down and cried. He literally soaked the front of Arnold's shirt as Arnold held this man in his arms. Finally they got him settled down, and it was decided that Ronnie would go with Rev. Lovell to the funeral home the next day. Since Ronnie's reaction to his parent's death was so out of control, Arnold was more than a little concerned about what might happen.

Ronnie entered the funeral home, went straight over to the casket and said, "That's mommy's body." "That's right Ronnie." "She's not there any more. She's with Jesus."

The next day they drove out to the cemetery, just Ronnie and his pastor. Ronnie looked at the grave of his father and said, "Is that where they put daddy?" "Yes." And then he looked at the open pit next to his father's grave and said, "Is this where they are going to put mommy?"



“Yes.”

And then he looked at the plot next to his father’s grave and said, “Is this where they’ll put me?” “Yes. One day we all die Ronnie.” That seemed to satisfy him.

On the way home Ronnie’s spirits seemed to brighten as he listened to gospel music on the radio, and invited Rev. “Wovell” (as he called him) to come into the house and listen to his favorite record.

Arnold obliged and Ronnie put on the record. It was Elvis Presley’s version of “How Great Thou Art.” Ronnie was enthralled with the music and sang along from time to time.

As the pastor listened to the words of that song and looked at Ronnie he found himself deeply moved by it all. He said, “God made the stars, the rolling thunder, the universe and a man named Ronnie ... who had the faith to praise God even in the most difficult of circumstances.”

Arnold concluded his story by saying, “I reached out and touched a leper; someone who had lost so much that nobody had the nerve to do anything. But, that leper touched me back and became for me the embodiment of Jesus Christ. And I was changed.”

Remember that old AT&T commercial? “Reach out and touch someone.” That’s more than a commercial. That’s a divine imperative. That’s what God in Christ is calling you to do even today.

Amen.