

May God's word only be spoken and heard here, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Week in and week out we read Scriptures written 2000+ years ago, and struggle to understand what they mean for us in the 21st century. Or at least I do. Sometimes the meaning of Jesus' words jump right off the page and seem to make perfect sense for my life, easily understood and implemented. Sometimes less so.

Today is one of those days when I'm struggling to make sense of what Jesus is saying to us. For six consecutive weeks we have read from the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. Mark wants us to know, in a few opening, bold strokes, the nature of Jesus' ministry. We have met Jesus the teacher, the preacher. Now we meet Jesus the exorcist and healer. The people around Jesus have been amazed by him, but here we wonder if Mark wants to move us beyond simple amazement, to ponder more deeply who Jesus is and what is the shape of his ministry.

As Pete Powell said to us last week, Jesus' work was about proclaiming the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Preaching and teaching and healing were secondary to Jesus' message that God's kingdom was happening, had come, right in the midst of 1st century Palestine. And the kingdom is this: that God wanted then and God wants now to be in relationship with every person, that God wanted then and wants now that God's love, peace, wholeness and justice prevail everywhere. Jesus' teaching and preaching and healing all pointed to the coming of God's kingdom.

So enter this strange story. Jesus is encountered by a man with leprosy, a disfiguring skin disease that caused terror in the ancient world. There was nothing to be done for leprosy until antibiotics were discovered. Lepers were complete outcasts. They were always beggars, for they were not permitted other forms of employment, not permitted to interact with the more healthy population, or to worship with the community. One was cast out of community, home, and family. He was isolated. The leper was a person as good as dead.

So for Jesus to reach out and touch the man to heal him was more than performing a medical miracle. He is situating himself in relationship to the holiness codes of the Law of Moses. These related to cleanness and uncleanness, to inclusion and exclusion from the community. And while we think of the man in today's story as having Hansen's disease, or leprosy, in fact he could have suffered from any contagious skin disorder, even as mild as athlete's foot. But the Law of Moses is very specific that anyone with skin diseases of any sort be excluded from the community as "unclean", and getting restored to wholeness, to cleanliness, to the life of the community is indeed a big deal. It is like being raised from the dead.

What Jesus is doing is witnessing to the importance of the community out of which he comes, he is restoring the man to his place in the life of his community by healing him. He touches him. He acknowledges him as a human being. He brings him out of isolation. He restores him to *inclusion* and wholeness and full membership in the community once again.

Why is this important? Because the life of the community is about life with God. That's what the Israelites understood. That's what we know. That to be faithful to God we must be faithful to one another, to the people with whom we are in community, to bear one another's burdens, to struggle together, to support one another, to play together, to eat together. Jesus was not setting himself up in opposition to the religious authorities. What Jesus was trying to do was to restore people to right relationship with God, through the Commandments, the Torah, that God had given the community. And if you think about the Commandments for a minute, you realize that more than half of them are about our relationships with other people.

I think we're here today because we are seeking God and other persons with whom to find and be found by God. I think many of us feel isolated, perhaps even estranged, in spite of the fact that we live with family, in neighborhoods or in community of one sort or another. Perhaps we are even hungry for human touch, a hand held, a pat on the back, a hug, a recognition that we are humans with the need to be connected with others.

Jesus understood that need and reached out to the leper, at whatever the personal cost. Jesus recognized the barriers that keep people from interacting with one another, and in his touch with the leper broke those barriers. And it's not necessarily illness or disease that builds the isolation or the barriers, but rather disconnection, discord, disharmony, in our lives. And also unemployment, divorce, depression, addictions, and of course race, class, economic standing, ethnicity and still others that separate us one from another. So Jesus' reaching out and touching the man was a way of bridging barriers, building community, and acknowledging the importance of every human being.

Jesus puts him back into contact with the rest of humanity. He tells the man to go show himself to the priests. The man is to go witness to the religious authorities that life has overcome death; that there is a power available that is loose in the world and this power is in the person of Jesus. The man was to go and tell that to all of the professional religious people, even before he went home, back to his beloved family.

And then Jesus told him to tell no one else. But the man failed to obey Jesus. Perhaps that seems incredibly ungrateful. Jesus has healed him from leprosy and all Jesus asked was that, after showing the religious authorities what had happened, he should keep it to himself. But he could not keep it to himself. He had to go and shout to everybody what Jesus had done for him. He was so grateful, so excited. He was now free.

But because he went and told everybody, ironically, Jesus is no longer free. A once trapped man is now free to go where he wants. Jesus now must be isolated, apart from the city. Now Jesus is forced to stay in Galilee, out in the countryside. In healing the isolated sick man, Jesus has become an isolated man. Jesus restored a bruised and broken man to health and wholeness. He restored him for life, to human community. And as a result, Jesus becomes a marked man, a lonely man, eventually a dead man. Jesus has sacrificed his personal freedom in order to care for someone else.

I knew of a man who donated one of his kidneys to save the life of his brother who was dying of kidney failure. Of course, we have two kidneys, and he can still live with only one. And yet, his life was more restricted, he had to take various drugs to offset the loss of his kidney. There were restrictions.

I also know a woman, now in her late seventies, who has given much of her adult life to caring for a mentally challenged adult son. She might have put him in an institution where others could have cared for him. But she felt it would be better for him. She knew that he would have a more satisfying life if she stayed at home with him and she attended to his needs. This has been wonderful for the son. He is now in his fifties and still in relatively good health except for his mental disabilities. But it has meant that her life has been severely restricted and confined. There have been many occasions when she has been unable to go to church or to a meeting, or socialize with her friends, because she has taken on the care of her son. And yet, when I talked to her, she told me, "He is the best thing that ever happened to me. He has given me a wonderful purpose in my life. He has been a gift."

It's rare that an act of goodness comes without cost. It is rare that some deed of compassion does not cause some pain to the doer and the giver.

It was certainly that way with Jesus. When he came face to face with evil in this world, he did not sit back and philosophize. Rather, he pronounced, "I will heal you!" He reached out, got involved, touched, and healed. As a result, he caught what we had. He, for our sakes, became infected with our sinfulness, the limitations of our humanity. Though he was not afflicted with leprosy, his body, hanging from the cross, was afflicted much worse.

He was crucified not in the middle of the big city, but "outside the gate" on a lonely hill, the utter outcast. When we move to the Lord's Table, as community with one another, when we partake of Holy Communion, we say this, we do this in celebration of the one who for our sake became human. This is my body, broken for *you*. This is my blood, shared for *you*. He got what we got, so that we may get what he has. Thanks be to God.

AMEN.