

Mark 1:40-45 The Leper and Jesus

'I was pissed off I suppose, and desperate..' said the leper..' after all those priests seemed useless and I was unclean and unsightly and abandoned and lonely and an outsider.. It shouldn't be like this.

I went up to him boldly.. Broke the law I did.. Didn't cry out 'unclean, unclean' as I was supposed to. Just walked up to him, seeking help.. In his face if you like.. I knelt down in front of him and pleaded. The crowds were aghast. They fell back pretty quickly, didn't want to catch what I've got! I said to him, 'if you want you can make me clean'. I didn't care, and I did, I hoped against hope.. That he would and that he could!

And he did! And he touched me. All the fire went out. A new spirit entered. He touched me, me who am an unclean man no longer..

'I do choose' he said 'be made clean!' and I was! Praise be to God! But then he asked me, no, told me to go back to the priests and show them I am healed, and to offer sacrifice.. I'm not going to do that! What has their religion ever done for me? I am going to tell everyone about this Jesus. How can I keep silent? He must be crazy to ask ME to shut up, especially after this! I'm telling everyone!

In this case, this leper is a pain! A thorn, an irritant.. First, facing me today with those I exclude, then, being healed and included inspire of that!

Jesus might tell the story like this:

I was working, preaching, casting out demons, as you do..

Carrying out my mission with passion. Caring, making a difference, when I was confronted by this unkempt unruly man, begging and kneeling at my feet. He smelt, and he looked awful! Why didn't he announce his presence as required by the law?

I was angry, I must admit. Angry at the state he was in, angry that the priests obviously hadn't helped, disturbed at the implications of his presence.. Unclean he was, according to our law.

He begged and pleaded, there was desperation, and something else in his voice, defiance? 'If you want, you can make me clean', he said. If I want? Course I want!!

My heart went out to him. I reached out my hand and touched him-

a so-called unclean one – and he was that! I touched him. I could see it in his eyes, he changed. 'I do choose.' I said, 'Be made clean!' You are a child of God.

It was done. We are connected forever now.. He is healed.. But I was strict. 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go show yourself to the Priest, and offer for you're cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them'.. But he took no notice! He told everyone what had happened, he could not contain himself.. I suspected something like this might happen.

Now, because of him, because of this, 'once outsider', I am cast out.. back to the wilderness, out of the cities into the countryside a very familiar place to me.. Everyone is looking for a healer. My message is more than that! Now I am in real danger from those in power. They don't take kindly to those who seem to take their place!

They have a lot to lose including prestige and authority... it could get nasty. I am in danger.

Here we see an image of God who is often far more willing and eager to bless than we are to be blessed.

Who do you consider unclean? Who is in your face, at the moment? Who challenges you to the limits?

I have been faced with that question myself lately at Holy Covenant. Who do I consider unclean? Who is in my face? What challenges me to the limits? There are some it would be easier to exclude. Being inclusive of all is challenging. Some here do not get on with others or do not agree with others. Some, I do not agree with.. I am constantly challenged to listen to all sides in a debate, to listen to you, and 'the other', within and beyond, and the one who comes to me for healing 'if you choose, you can make me clean'..they might say, or something like it.. How do I respond? Turn away? Or reach out my hand?

Jesus chose inclusion and healing and freedom. He had compassion. He touched in a very physical way. He got his hands dirty. He did not turn away, but it's tough sometimes. Sometimes it means being excluded myself, sent out into the wilderness, ostracized, and denied.

People come to this place, this community, to me, to us, seeking healing and freedom and community. People come of different

ages and genders, different sexual orientations, ethnicity, single, partnered, adulterers, pedophiles, thieves, gluttons, ..I/we try to see them, each other, really see, beyond the label, the grime of ostracism, the pain of dis-ease, see, and reach out and touch, and by God's grace, offer healing, rest, transformation, freedom, encouragement, life! That is my challenge, and ours, if we take this story to heart. Grace is more important than law, though Jesus did stay in his tradition, did worship in the Synagogue, challenged, yes, but knew the law and tradition. I do feel for the outsider very much, and want to offer safety, and home- but it sometimes means I have to change.

The leper says something like, "If you want to (and you do), you are able to cleanse me. Jesus confirms his willingness with a simple. "I am willing." This seems to me to be central to the passage and here's why.

At this still early point in Mark we are learning about Jesus and what discipleship as one of Jesus' followers might be. Mark has shown us a Jesus able and willing to heal all sorts of woes from illnesses to possession. These healings, it is very clear, are signs of what God's reign means for human beings -- a restoration to a condition of blessedness or thriving or flourishing. Humankind will no longer be oppressed by the powers of evil. We have seen Jesus' intense interactions with the demons who know him. We have also heard Jesus insist that it is his calling to destroy these powers hostile to God's reign even as he must go about announcing it so that all may have the opportunity to repent and trust God (cf. 1:15).

So Jesus must go where the people are. By the end of this story, Jesus has shown us what it costs to go where the people are and it is a cost he is "willing" to pay. He begins as the one free to wander and proclaim, urgent in his message and successful in gathering crowds. By the end of the story Jesus has traded places with the former leper who is now wandering freely, proclaiming what the Lord has done and creating widespread positive response, while Jesus has become isolated and lonely. There is an exchange of roles, an exchange of realities between Jesus and the man whom he has healed: this points long-range to the role that Jesus is willing to take for humanity itself, giving up his life of freedom for the loneliness of the one isolated on Golgotha, whose "willingness" is a proclamation in its own right. He will use the

language of "willing" in 14:36, exchanging his own desires for what the Father "wills."

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching_print.aspx?commentary_id=1201

Sarah Heindrich

Brian McGowan reflects:

A question that keeps recurring in church circles is 'How does healing work?' Some explanations leave me desperately craving a holiness I know I don't have. Others make me tear out the little hair I have left. At this stage of my journey, the closest I can get to how it 'works' is to believe that 'healing' takes place when God's love is brought to bear by one means or another, taking the form of healing energy. It might be the touch of a hand (as here), well targeted medicine or surgery, or a host of other ways. I believe God's energy brought to bear with love & integrity still heals. There is no set formula. It is always an act of grace. No-one need feel bad or guilty when someone we pray for dies. We haven't failed if we've done what we could do. It takes a lot of love, a lot of integrity, a lot of effort, a lot of persistence, & a lot of grace. The person on whose behalf God gives us the grace to apply these may still die, but be sure real healing has taken place. Besides, we all need to come to terms with our mortality somewhere along the way.

* My observation of those who make capital out of the healing ministry is that they lack some, or even all of these qualities. For the same reason, health care systems based solely on the profit motive will bring us undone as often as they help our healing. Stitching us up, whereas God raises us up. True healing isn't a commodity, any more than Jesus allows himself to become a commodity when he opts out of what people are chasing him for and goes back to the wilderness.

(Marginally Mark, by Brian McGowan, Anglican priest in Western Australia.)

Michael Faragher writes this week:

As always, thank you for your prayers, thoughts, e-mails, phone calls and so forth. Daily I am buoyed up and supported by your thoughtfulness, good humour and care. One of the big dangers with cancer that I've noticed from my own experience and conversations with others in the oncology waiting-room, is the tendency for one's mind to race away with "what if's?". I've

occasionally found myself staring at the ceiling in the early hours of the morning trying to work out all sorts of hypotheticals and devising solutions to problems that may never come. I need to to learn to replace this kind of futile disaster planning with prayer: to simply open myself to the presence and comfort of God. In Mark's gospel (v.40) we read, "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!" My challenge, and it may well be yours too, is to replace my reliance on human ways and thoughts with the complete and unconditional trust in Jesus expressed by that leper.

I wonder, what might the leper have to say to us across the centuries?

I praise God I am healed and free and able to live a normal life. But I am changed in more ways than this. I know people matter in God's eyes. I am thankful for Jesus. He saw me. He touched me. He healed me. I trust him with my life!

What might he say to you?

And Jesus? What is he saying to you? To me?

Words of comfort? challenge? Love? Or no words at all, just a touch, a look..

Susanna Pain 12 February 2012

Resources in: <http://www.textweek.com/mkjnacts/mark1g.htm>