

“So what do you mean, keep it a secret?”
2 Kings 5:1-14 Mark 1:40-45

They really didn't understand it. But, of course, they really had no means to. How could they possibly know that it was contagious only after long periods of very close contact? The only thing they knew about it was what it looked like and what it did to a person, especially in the advanced stages. That they knew well. They understood how it maimed and disfigured. And that was enough for fear to take over.

I'm talking about the disease of leprosy. In a world and a time in which the disease has all but been eradicated except in small pockets, we perhaps cannot appreciate the fear that accompanied this word in the ancient world of Jesus. It was a red flag word. It brought about the same responses as the word Plague did in the 1200s, or Small Pox in the 1700s, or Aids in the 1900s. It frightened them. They felt helpless against it, and the only way they knew to protect themselves was to isolate those who began to show symptoms.

We can only imagine the plight of the leper in Jesus' time. The unsightly disease killed inch by inch, by slow disfigurement, over months and years of its slow progression. There was a saying among the rabbis of that day which expressed the common belief: to heal leprosy was as difficult as raising the dead. In other words, **forget about it.**

This disease has largely been eradicated in our world, but not totally. When I was in high school my father was stationed at an Air Force Base in northern Japan, so the Youth Group I attended was known as PYOC, Protestant Youth of the Chapel. We met on Sunday evenings. Our leader learned of a leper colony that was located outside a neighboring village. After making some inquiries we learned that with advanced planning it would be possible for us to visit one of their chapel services. For several weeks we practiced some special music we would sing as a part of that service.

The evening we drove there I remember feeling more than a little nervous. I didn't mind visiting people who were having a rough time of it and trying to bring some joy to their lives, but I had no desire to be exposed to leprosy. After all I was more than a little relieved when we discovered that we were assigned to sit in the choir loft which was on the side of the small chapel and separated from where the lepers would sit. From that safe space, though, I watched attentively as they came into the service. Many of their conditions were quite advanced; some had lost portions of fingers, some portions of some of their noses or ears were missing. They all had bandages wrapped around various parts of their body. As they came into the chapel and passed us by, each one of them bowed and smiled to us. Some of their smiles were a bit contorted because of the disfigurement of the disease, but each showed great respect.

The service was reverent and subdued. Before we left one of the Christian missionaries who helped provide care there explained to us that most of these people were originally from the south of Japan and for many of the people the progression of their leprosy had been made worse by exposure to radiation from the nuclear bombs dropped on that country at the end of World War II.

That was a long time ago. I graduated from high school in 1966. There was much that I did not understand, but our bus ride back to the base that Sunday evening was very quiet.

This leper who came to Jesus knew what it was to live without hope and to live in desperation. He knew what it was to live in a “forget about it” kind of situation. He came to Jesus “begging” and “kneeling.” He may have been desperate and he may have been without hope, but he came with faith.

Now this is obviously a story about healing and it certainly qualifies as a miracle, but I think we would be wise to not try to make it into a formula for healing. Right here in the first Chapter of Mark there are three healings in a row, one takes place in a religious place, one takes place in a house, and this one occurs in an unnamed public place. There are no formulas here, and as much as we might like to find one, neither is there a simple step by step, no-fail prescription.

What we do find here is the hard work of engagement, Engagement, real relationship is always hard because it requires us to be vulnerable. Vulnerability asks that we drop our slogans and our pretenses and adopt an attitude of humility with each other and with God.

The leper has faith that Jesus can make him clean. He doesn't say, “Can you do anything about this?” He has faith that Jesus can make him clean. He says, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” The leper asks from the position of a beggar, one without any kind of power at all. Because he has been judged to be unclean, he is no longer a person of any influence at all; he has been completely ostracized. He asks Jesus to take the initiative; he asks him to choose to act on his behalf.

The next phrase describes Jesus motivation as being “moved with pity.” The Greek word here is splanchnizomai. I don't think we have an English word that captures its fullness of meaning. It is an intensely emotional response. Jesus' blood boils. His bowels churn. It is a response that is more than a reasoned choice; it viscerally propels him to action. Mark says, “He reached out his hand and touched him, this is no playing it safe, Jesus chooses to make himself unclean, he touches the leper, he exposes himself to leprosy, and even more than that, he makes himself unclean so that he can say to this desperate leper, “Be made clean!”

That is God's healing love expressed in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the risky, barrier breaking, boundary crossing, border invading love of God expressed in its fullness. That is the kind of healing to which Jesus gave himself.

We are called to be a part of that as well. Yesterday we celebrated Valentine's Day, a day of love usually thought of as romantic love. I love the way our sanctuary is wonderfully decorated this morning. The worship committee did a beautiful job. When I came in here to pray yesterday afternoon I had the thought that being in this sanctuary felt like being inside a three dimensional valentine's card. You know, there is something to that, that is actually a great way to think of the church. Jesus is God's valentine card to us, his disciples and we, the church are called to be God's full expression of love to the world, God's valentine card to the world, if you will.

I just finished a book that many of you may also have read called The Shack. I found it very uplifting in many ways; its not a perfect book, but I think it is the friendliest expression I know of of the doctrine of the Trinity and the fullness of the love of God that is at the heart of the Trinity. There is one expression that is used several times. The person of God the Father is portrayed as a jovial African woman named Papa. She refers to one person by saying, "We are especially fond of him." A little later on another person is being discussed and again the comment is made, "We are especially fond of him." Later on, another person who is a bit difficult is referred to and again the same comment is made, "You know, we are especially fond of her." Soon you get the idea that this is God's attitude toward every one of God's children. "I am especially fond of you!"

There is not one of us here this morning who would not benefit from hearing that, so why not, let's practice it right now, turn to the person beside you and say to them, "God is especially fond of you." And the reply is also, "God is especially fond of you!" Try it, will you?

That is our call as the disciples of Jesus, to be God's valentine card to everyone of God's children, but be careful here, this is the beginning of the hard part, this is never just about us. Jesus is not just God's valentine card to us in the church, and the church is never called to just minister in God's love to each other. Its not that there is anything wrong with that, but there are many other clubs with that purpose. But a church is not a club. God's initiative is not what is in question here either. The love of God is expressed individually, but it is never expressed in isolation, and the move of the grace of God is always to break down barriers, cross boundaries of exclusion, and to open up borders erected in the name of security but really exist to protect cherished prejudices.

When we look at the story here, the healing is never really in question at all. All we are told of the healing is that "immediately he was made clean," just like that.

But after this child of God is made clean, Jesus quite forcefully gives him some very specific instructions, what not to do and what he is to do. Now I have to

confess, I don't have this figured out at all. I can speculate about reasons for each but that doesn't mean that someone else might look at it quite differently. And the way Mark tells us about Jesus, just because Jesus is proclaiming the gospel and is the Son of God, it doesn't mean that he is not learning as he goes as well.

This newly made clean man is told not to say anything to anyone. What could Jesus possibly mean by that? Is he afraid of something? We often assume that secrets are about fear. Or could there be another motivation here; perhaps Jesus is wise enough to know that the gospel is not really dependent on having an effective publicity campaign or mounting a cunning marketing strategy. What about the possibility that while healing is good, making a big show of it actually isn't very good at all? Perhaps there are spiritual realities that are actually stronger than all of that; anonymity can be an incredible powerful force of God's love.

I have heard it said that if you get a group of people together with a common vision and nobody cares who gets the credit for anything, there is no limit to what can be accomplished. But that actually isn't what happens here. The man went out and couldn't help himself, he proclaimed it freely.

But the other instruction Jesus gave him was specifically one of direct engagement, he told the man to go and show himself to the priests, who were the official leper checkers and to conform to all the official requirements to be made a fully recognized, card carrying, dues paying member of the community again. He was not to avoid the ones who had ostracized him from the community in the first place. He was to become a member in good standing.

For Jesus being made clean seemed to be as much about being a member of a community as getting a clean bill of health. Come to think of it, that was his message; not about come to me and get healed. He says "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near." The gospel is always about much more than individual salvation and healing, it is even more about the restoration of community.

That is why Jesus insists on proclaiming the need for repentance for we cannot grow closer to God without being brought closer to each other. So where is Jesus left here? He can no longer go into the town, but he now stays out in the country. Why? Is it because he has now become too popular. That isn't it at all.

Jesus has become unclean himself. He has touched the leper and become himself impure. He is polluted, an unclean man. The leper is now clean; Jesus is the one who is unclean. Jesus doesn't go to people, but people come to this unclean and impure savior.

The gospel will overcome and overwhelm every strategy of exclusion because that is the way love works.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
You are so very special to them. Amen.

Rev Stephen Hoffman
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First United Methodist Church of Palmetto