

"I Do Choose"

15 February 2009

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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.' Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 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.' 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.

Prayer.

In our Gospel lesson for today,

faith brought a man with leprosy to Jesus - Begging.

Being a leper, he would have had experience begging.

This was how he had survived, edged out his existence.

Kneeling. He submitted himself before Jesus.

"If you choose," implies he knows he can!

He knows the choice is up to Jesus.

It's not a matter of if he can.

It's a matter of *if he chooses*.

This man must know of Jesus'

casting out demons in the synagogue,

healing Simon's Mother-in-Law,

and Jesus healing and casting out demons

in the crowds pressing to the house.

Jesus was moved with pity.

"pity" "Being moved with compassion"

Greek: splanchnistheix, "to have the bowels yearn,

i.e. to feel sympathy,

to pity: have, or be moved with, compassion." (Strong's Concordance)

Compassion: Com (with) passion (to feel); to feel, to suffer with:

In Hebrew- "womb."

Jesus chooses to cross social and religious barriers.

Leprosy is the focus of Leviticus 13 & 14.

"Swelling" "Eruption," "spot," "the disease appears to be deeper than the skin,"

v.3 "he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean."

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v.15 "Raw flesh is unclean, for it is a leprous disease."

All skin diseases were lumped together under the one term, "leprosy".

Some of those diseases were undoubtedly leprosy as we know it today, and those sufferers would be unclean for the whole of their lives.

But other skin diseases, such as eczema, are cyclical.

So those people would be declared clean and readmitted to normal society during the periods that the disease was in remission.

Any form of decay, sores, disfigurement or unusual characteristic was cause to bring a person to the priests.

There were rituals of sacrifice for sin, which the priests could perform on behalf of the exiled.

God's creation was seen as perfect

so any distortion was viewed as sin or a result of sin.

Leprosy made a person unclean.

Leviticus 13:45-46

"The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp."

The process for a person being made clean can be found in Leviticus 14

"This shall be the ritual for the leprous person at the time of his cleansing: He shall be brought to the priest; the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall make an examination. If the disease is healed in the leprous person, ...then he shall pronounce him clean, ... The one who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water, and he shall be clean. After that he shall come into the camp, but shall live outside his tent seven days. On the seventh day he shall shave all his hair: of head, beard, eyebrows; he shall shave all his hair. Then he shall wash his clothes, and bathe his body in water, and he shall be clean."

Jesus crosses barriers

by reaching out with his hand and touching the person in need.

The cure stories feature the hand, as a symbol of touch or contact.

Jesus reaches out and lifts Simon's mother-in-law, "by the hand" and she was healed.

The helping hand of Jesus reaches out to the groveling, diseased, wreck of a man kneeling before him.

"Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him."

Jesus risked his own status, of being clean.

Jesus took the risk of social rejection.

Jesus took the risk of contracting the horribly disfiguring disease of leprosy.

Touching the leper is Jesus' risk and the leper's greatest need.

But the risk is worth taking.

While power flows out from one to the other,
it is not the unclean power contaminating Jesus,
but the power of wholeness healing the leper.

"I do choose"

– Jesus chooses to take the risk.
The Gospel pictures Jesus as the "new priest"
who *wills* to touch,
heal, and return a leper to the community.
Jesus wants this man restored!
His command is simple: "Be made clean!"
There is no formula, no liturgy, no magic word.
The healing words of Jesus are simple and to the point.

Jesus wants the man to follow the law, as a testimony to the religious authorities.

When the healing is complete,
Jesus sends the man straight off to register himself with the priest,
so that he can be socially included again among his people.
Jesus' concern is for the man to be, first, healed,
and second, reunited into the community.
Jesus desires social healing and restoration
as much as he desires physical healing.

Jesus tells the man to be quiet;

when he fails to contain his joy,
the irony is that Jesus himself becomes isolated.
He finds his ability to itinerate freely from town to town becomes limited.
Instead people came out into the country to where Jesus was.
We do not know quite what he told people,
but, whatever it was,
it results in such fame for Jesus
that he cannot go into the town anymore.
Jesus' power is already beginning to be costly,
and sets him outside the community
to whom he has come to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

Although Jesus is eager to proclaim the gospel,
he frequently commands people, demons, and disciples
to "tell no one" about him and his deeds of power (8 times).
The command usually comes after
a demon has announced the identity of Jesus,
or after Jesus' power has been displayed in a dramatic healing.
Sometimes Jesus is perceived by people
as a miracle-worker,

an agent of evil,
or a prophet like Elijah.
Some of these perceptions are clearly wrong
—he is certainly not an agent of Satan (3:22-30)
nor is he merely a miracle-worker.
Other times Jesus is called "the Holy One of God,"
"Son of God,"
or "Messiah."
Although these titles contain some truth,
they are incomplete and inadequate.
To allow people to announce him as the "Messiah"
would arouse hopes
that he has come to cast off
the oppression of Rome
and re-establish Judah as a free and independent kingdom.
Jesus had other motives for healing, preaching, teaching, dying, and rising.

What this means for us today.

Faith brings us to Jesus.

Faith is what inspires that gentle nudge,
that fleeting thought,
that wonder and question:
Why am I here?
What is my purpose in life?
How do I relate to God?

God has given us all the faith that is necessary, "Prevenient grace."

It's not much,
just enough to kick start our own life of faith.
But that first seed, comes from God.

It's up to us to transform our faith into action,

to seek Jesus,
to meet him on his terms,
and to submit ourselves
to his divine will.

Like the leper in the story,
each of us can ask our Savior,
"Can you be bothered with me?"

The answer will always be yes.
Jesus always meets us where we are at.

Our God is a god of compassion.

Our submission,
our petitions,
our intercessions move Jesus.

They move Jesus to act on our behalf.
His divine emotions connect with us in a very profound way.
God cares about what goes on in our lives,
and is moved to action to bring about healing, wholeness, restoration, and his kingdom.
God is involved with the circumstances of life.
God isn't a casual observer, or an uninvolved bystander.
God is actively moved to compassion by our brokenness, hurt, pain, and suffering.
God always desires something better for us.

Jesus is willing to take risks to further his Kingdom, and so should we.

We must be willing to risk our social standing for Jesus' sake.

We are asked to risk our health for Jesus' sake.

We are asked to risk our lives for Jesus' sake.

When we make ourselves vulnerable,
when we open our lives to advance the kingdom of God,
we risk poverty, disease, destruction, and isolation.

Jesus is willing to break barriers that prevent people from wholeness, that breaks relationships, that exclude people; and so should we.

Jesus' attitude towards the leper and his healing touch
form the invitation to us who follow him.

Consider all those things in society that exclude people:
politics, ethnic backgrounds, gender,
sexual orientation, wealth, language,
even length of time living in a community.

Consider the many "camps" or factions
who seem to be dedicated to one thing
and dedicated against all others.

There are many "ins" and "outs"
"us" and "them."

Jesus' movement is outward,
inclusive,
and compassionate
towards the "them" or "others" who have been sinned against.

We
who have been healed by Jesus
are missioned by the Word and the Eucharist
to extend his healing touch to the world.

Jesus wasn't angry with the leper,
but was deeply angry with the society which excluded such people.

Jesus came to include.

Sin divides;

our sins and those of others perpetuate alienation.

Physical disfigurement or mental disturbance is not necessarily caused by sin.

Jesus came to save us from sin and hopefully, from sinning.

Sin and disease separate us from each other and our God.

Jesus bring restoration to the broken relationship
and healing to the broken soul.

This scripture offers firm guidelines for the church and for individual Christians.

Should we engage in ministries of healing?

Yes.

Should we oppose disease and support efforts to eradicate them?

Yes.

Should we have compassion for those who suffer?

Yes.

Should our efforts include campaigns to gather crowds, win converts, and boost personalities (including that of Jesus)? No.

Church isn't about growing crowds, though crowds might come.

Church isn't about increasing the budget, though often the cost of doing ministry will grow.

Church isn't about visibility, marketing, or the latest program.

Church is called to be an environment of healing and restoration,
mercy and compassion,
forgiveness and salvation.

It seems to be that all of us Christians are called to be healers.

It's so easy to hurt, to do harm.

How much better to heal!

No, we do not have to go to medical school.

We can just go to the clinic Christ sets up,
learn about love,

about caring for everyone,

even the most lowly,

learn to put our fears aside

and reach out to touch even the worst untouchables.

But we can be healers too in our own relationships,
in our homes,

in our places of employment,

in our community.

If we look, we will find wounds everywhere

for which we can bring some healing balm,

some word of hope,

some act of love and caring,

some prayer of intercession.

Look around you, my friends.

Where and how can you be a healer?

Reach out and touch,

knowing that through your touch

can be the touch of the Great Physician.

This is the Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.