

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

5th Sunday after Epiphany

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Text: Mark 1:40-45

Title: "Bread Bath and Beyond: Beyond the Hype"

Have you heard about the measles lately? When I was a child it was required that children be immunized. I didn't research the details but somewhere along the way that requirement changed to choice. And when a doctor postulated that some children became autistic as a result of such immunization, some parents panicked and chose not to have their children immunized against measles. And guess what? Now people seem to be panicking again because we have a reoccurrence of measles. Now, I heard on the radio this last week as I drove to the church that parents who have had their kids immunized are calling for parents who haven't to keep their kids home if they've been around anyone who has had the measles. They are basically calling for quarantine.

When we are afraid, we can find ourselves cutting people off, separating ourselves from them, keeping them at a distance so we won't get what they have or maybe we grow weary of dealing with what they have. Might not be the measles but something else: mental illness, grief that lasts longer than we think it should, addictions that are painful to watch. There are habits in the human family and one of them is the tendency to find ways of separating ourselves from those we perceive to have something we don't want in our lives. I'm not suggesting that everybody find someone with Ebola and ignore necessary precautions of gearing up before caring for the person. But does our fear sometimes unnecessarily cut people off from the kind of relationships that might provide healing and wholeness? Do we cut ourselves off from people at times when they might need us most? Does the hype created by fear lead to people being isolated and alone?

That is certainly the case with the leper in the story from Mark's Gospel. Lepers were ostracized in those days. Actually, they still are today. Jose P. Ramirez Jr. had been sick for years before a Mexican healer told him he had "a disease of the Bible." He was 20 when he was diagnosed with leprosy, known as Hansen's disease, in 1968. The illness uprooted Ramirez from his large family, his high-school sweetheart, and his home in Laredo, Texas. State officials ordered him to seek treatment at the U.S. Public Health Hospital in Carville, La. — the only leprosarium in the continental United States. He has written a book about his journey with the illness and now, he travels the world making presentations about the disease.

Lepers in the first century were also considered unclean. Leprosy literally means scaly or rough and referred to any skin disease like psoriasis, acne, or boils. If the person was determined to be unclean by the priest, the law, according to the book of Leviticus says that

45 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." 46 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. (Leviticus 13:45-46)

That has been the fate of this leper who approaches Jesus as he tells Jesus: "If you choose you can make me clean." Notice he doesn't ask him to heal him. He isn't asking Jesus just to be free of his skin condition. He wants to be "clean" which means he can be part of the community again. If he has family he can go back to live with his family again. He can hang out with his friends again. No longer will he have to go about shouting, "Unclean, unclean", so that anyone within earshot will run the other way. He wants to be clean. He wants to be in relationship again not cut off from human contact. Can you imagine the loneliness of being unclean?

Jesus' response in this Gospel account might be summarized in four words: compassion, touch, willing & loneliness. Let's take one at a time.

First, compassion. It isn't often that in the Gospel According to Mark we read of Jesus' psychological state, but when Jesus encounters this man who is desperately seeking freedom from the chains of an illness that keeps him separate from people, Jesus is moved with pity or compassion. Jesus doesn't respond with judgment asking the man what he did to deserve this condition he has, which wasn't and isn't an uncommon response when someone is suffering: "What did you do to bring this on yourself?" He didn't reprimand him, "What's the matter with you? Why aren't you yelling 'Unclean! Unclean!' as the law requires. Get back!" And he didn't demand justification: "If I heal you what will you do with your life?" None of these or any other such confrontational approaches that are common then and now does Jesus take with the man in need. Instead, Jesus feels compassion. And remember that this is God incarnate acting here, the Word made flesh, the Son of Man and Son of God. This is also God: not primarily judgmental, or reprimanding or demanding justification in order to care for someone... but compassionate.

Second, Jesus touches the man which is so very risky because he has effectively made himself unclean. Now he, too, would be considered unfit for worship until he has passed through the proper procedures according to the law in order to be cleansed. But Jesus took the risk to touch him, maybe because the request was to be cleansed not healed, cleansed so he could touch others again, be in relationships again.

A simple touch is so important when we relate to each other isn't it? Sometimes we take it for granted. Ask someone who may feel isolated—the elderly, the ill, the depressed—how beautiful human touch is. You might be surprised or just reminded that such a simple gesture has the power to express profound care and love. It can on many levels be healing in and of itself.

Jesus could have healed the man from a distance. There are other stories in which he did so. He could have just spoken a word, a command, but there's something about this situation apparently that called for him to reach out and touch this man who has been isolated by an illness

for which he did not ask.

Again, we have God acting. God's character is such that God is eager to be in relationship with us and as such has taken on the form of flesh, becomes like us, so that God can reach out to us in love. What a beautiful image of God: a hand stretched toward us wanting to be in relationship with us.

Third, willing: The man says to Jesus, "If you choose...", and Jesus does choose, is willing. Last Sunday, we heard the story of Jesus freeing a man from an unclean spirit and that Jesus did not equate the man with his condition. That is, Jesus saw beyond the condition from which the man was suffering and loved the man but not that from which he suffered. In the same way, Jesus affirms the value, dignity and worth of the person in spite of the disease from which he suffered. He doesn't blame the victim but confirms the human being as a child of God, valued and worthy of God's grace and mercy.

Here again we are confronted with the character of God whose willingness and desire to express uncontrollable mercy and grace is surprising. That's just the way Jesus is. It's the way God is. In fact, God is often far more willing and eager to bless than we are to be blessed or to bless others. Thank God for that!

Finally, lonely. There is a cost to Jesus for the acts of mercy he performs. Something is exchanged here in this cleansing. The man who is now healed is restored to his community while Jesus can't travel freely because the man won't keep quiet as Jesus asked. Did he ask him to keep quiet because he knew he wouldn't be able to even enter towns anymore? Was he concerned that since John the Baptist had already been killed by Herod that he'd be next if crowds started showing up as they did for John and the timing wasn't right? Whatever the reason or the risk, Jesus took it with this man. He healed him in spite of the cost which in essence meant that he would be trading places with this man. Losing his freedom so this man could have his. Love does cost something. If you don't believe it ask any parent or grandparent or spouse or friend.

So there we have it: God is compassionate in the face of human need; reaches out to touch us in love; is willing and eager to separate who we are from those things from which we suffer; and comes out of the kind of profound love that costs something.

Where does this story interact with your story? Are you in need of God's touch? Are you in need of someone recognizing that there is more to you than that from which you may be suffering, that you are valued and loved as a child of God in spite of that with which you may be struggling, that you have worth beyond what others may think of you? Or maybe you know someone who needs to hear the good news of this message. They are struggling, feeling isolated, left out or abandoned, hurting from some illness that's leaving them lonely. Can you let them know through a simple touch or a word of encouragement that you recognize that person's value and worth in spite of that from which he or she may be suffering? Can you express God's mercy and compassion?

I don't know about you but I am so grateful for the gift of healing story like this because it reminds us all that God is a God who desires our healing, wants to be part of our lives in ways that enrich our lives not destroy them. God comes in Christ with a desire for wholeness, a desire

to touch us. And when that happens we ARE made whole. We are. Who could ask for better news than that?