



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

The Outsider

Sermon for 2-12-2012

Scripture: Mark 1:40-45

Finally we come to the end of the first chapter in Mark. Today's passage talks about Jesus and a leper, a man with a skin disease. In the time of Jesus all such skin diseases were lumped together in the category of leprosy. These folks were considered unclean and had specific rules to set them apart such as wearing torn clothing and they had to shout at anyone that came close to them, "Unclean, unclean". You can find all these rules written down in the book of Leviticus. Anyone who suffered from such skin diseases was definitely an outsider Today leprosy is called Hansen's disease, and there are treatments that keep the disease from progressing.

In today's reading the "leper" recognizes Jesus as the man that has been performing miracles and comes humbly to him, kneeling in front of him and begging him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." And then Jesus does an extraordinary thing, he reaches out and touches this leper, the untouchables of that day, and says, "I do choose. Be made clean." We are told that immediately his leprosy is cured.

Last Sunday I talked about Jesus healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law by just reaching out and lifting her up. This is a church where people have gotten quite use to a hug from me or someone in the congregation. Sometimes I hug the same person 3 times on a Sunday. Although many of you may see this as repetitive, I see it as a way to convey intimacy and caring. There are some people that are seldom hugged or touched at all—elderly people living alone, those that are isolated in an institution for example, Dalits in India, the name used for the Untouchable class of



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

2

people. My mother lived alone for many years after my father died. I can remember how much it meant to her when someone would come by and especially if they gave her a hug. I'm also aware from my days as a psychotherapist, that some people do not want anyone to touch them. If you or someone you know falls in this category, please let me know as I always want to respect those boundaries.

The leper in our story as well as other alienated groups of people that are on the outside can be terribly lonely. In the situation in today's reading, one writer says that the leper's loneliness is like living as "a corpse haunting the edges of the community he could no longer enter." (Craddock) People in that day that had a physical defect or a bad reputation or a low class were called unclean. Therefore it was the priest, not the doctor that had to attend to those like this leper. Jesus followed the traditional pattern by telling the man to go show himself to the priest as Moses' Law commanded. It was the priest that had to give him permission to reenter the community. A second thing Jesus instructed the man was to keep quiet about the miracle. We know that part of the instructions were not followed; instead the leper was so overjoyed that he couldn't stop from telling all he met about the good news of Jesus. A rather strange reversal happened: the leper gained his freedom and Jesus lost much of his freedom. The crowds that had already started following him became larger and larger and it was hard for him to go anywhere public as he would be mobbed. These big crowds made the powers-that-be very nervous and therefore, could be very dangerous.

I mentioned how the community treated "lepers" as outsiders. We so often objectify people by calling them by names such as the lepers, the mentally ill, the homeless, the sick, the poor. I remember when I first became aware of my tendency to give people in certain groups the name of that group; for example, instead of



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

3

referring to the mentally ill, the kinder way is to refer to them as people who have mental illness. When we started working with the Hillsboro Ministerium to serve those who were without a stable place to live, we were cautioned not to call them homeless. Just as we are not referred to as the housed, we were told to call them people in transition, or what I prefer is to say those who are currently without a stable home, or those children or youth who are homeless. We need to be aware as to how naming can push people to the outside. It's a way to draw a line between us and them. We are we and they are the other instead of our brothers and sisters, human beings. As we look at our society, there are always groups of people pushed to the margins as different, "the Other", not deserving, or just not like us. It may be a person of a different race or religion; it may be someone who smells so bad from not having clean clothes or a place to bathe. Remember that Jesus taught us here and in many other places in the Gospels that no one is outside the reach of God's mercy and grace. Remember that we are part of that body of Christ called to extend our hand and our love.

In a few minutes I am going to invite you to come forward for laying on of hands and prayers for healing. First I want to share a couple of thoughts with you about Christian healing¹:

Christian healing is **not magic**. It is not manipulating God to do what we want; rather, it is surrendering to God's healing work in us. Christian healing is **not proof that we are faithful or holy** but simply one of many signs of God's love.

When we are not healed, it does not mean that we are not worthy or that our faith is not strong enough. Many of our great healers, including Paul, were never healed themselves. The Buddha talks about Right Action as one of the steps on the

¹ From online article by Carl Gregg, summing up a book by Tilda Norberg and Robert Webber called *Stretch Out Your Hand: Exploring Healing Prayer*



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

4

Eight-fold path. Right Action is an act that is ethically and morally clear; however, there is no promise of Right Results. One can be very devout, pray and meditate daily and do many good deeds and still not end up being healed. The fruits of the practice are not the results, only the practice.

Some Christians are very much into having a personal relationship with Jesus, a transformation on the inside that changes one's individual life without reaching out to share the good news with others by word or deed. For me and for most of you I would guess, that is not enough. We must reach out to each other, a community of faith, healing, caring and being cared for. Your cards last week touched me with your sadness and your pain and yet your willingness to care for others. Some of you asked for prayer for specific things and I want you to know I have and will continue to lift up to God those concerns.

As we move into our healing ritual, I suggest we include both personal and social healing. When you come down to be with me and the deacons, you may ask for either or both kinds of healing. Remember that we are all one in Christ. There does not have to be outsiders or the "Other". In the end it is God's love and our love working through this community of faith that will bring wholeness and healing to us all. That's what the kingdom of God is all about. Let's keep opening ourselves wider and wider to that Divine energy that can come through our hands, through our prayers, and through our deeds. I truly thank God and all of you for being my brothers and sisters in God's kingdom. Amen