

“We Are All Unclean!”

For the last several weeks, the gospel lesson has been taken from chapter one of Mark. I think it's important that we continue today to examine chapter one, because it lays the early foundation of Jesus' ministry, and I hope that we would seriously consider incorporating Jesus' style of ministry into our own life as a church, and as individuals. Also, I want to emphasize the point that Jesus came “teaching with authority and preaching with power,” and as such, I'm going to delivery today's message in a different way. I am going to read the gospel lesson verse by verse, stopping after each verse to share my notes. Then, I will read the lesson again straight through and followed with the proclamation. This passage speaks to the human condition, and it is important for us to plumb the depth of its meaning.

Before verse 40, chapter 1, the context has been about the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. He has called fishermen to be disciples. In Capernaum, Jesus established his authority as one sent by God by casting out an unclean spirit. Miracles become a vehicle for transmitting this authority. People were overwhelmed by his new teaching and wondered, “Is he the One we have been looking for?” Then Jesus goes to Simon Peter's mother-in-law's house and cures her of a fever. People from the whole town come to the house seeking Jesus. He ministers to some, but fearing too much publicity, slips away early in the morning. In prayer, Jesus reminds himself of the priority of his mission: to preach good news and not be known as a miracle worker. Jesus' real power is in his preaching and announcing that God's kingdom is at hand ... God's kingdom is now!

Verse 40: *Once (Jesus) was approached by a leper, who knelt before him, begging his help, “If only you will” said the man, ‘you can cleanse me.’* The word leprosy as translated from the Greek *lepra*, covered various skin diseases from psoriasis to elephantiasis, and does not have the narrow meaning of today's modern definition of leprosy. According to the Law of Moses (Torah) in Leviticus 13 and 14, a person labeled a leper had to keep their distance from the rest of society. If anyone unknowingly approached them, they had to cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” The word knelt in this verse indicates that the man already knew Jesus was more than mere man, and so he took the humble posture due a king or God. The leper was confident that Jesus could heal, so instead of approaching Jesus and asking from faith to be healed, the man places his health in Jesus' hands and makes it Jesus' responsibility to make him well.

Verse 41: *In warm indignation, (other translations read “in anger”) Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, “Indeed, I will; be clean again.”* The word indignation emphasizes that Jesus' anger is directed at the disease itself, and its demonic nature and social consequence that it has brought to this man and people like him. The phrase stretched out his hand is a gesture of authority, and combined with the word touch tells us that the power to heal is not in Jesus' hand or touch, because Jesus' word alone could command the miracle. No, I believe that Jesus visibly made hand contact as a genuine expression of compassion. Jesus is not contaminated, and thus he bridges the gap between fear and true compassion.

Verses 42 and 43: *The leprosy left him immediately, and he was clean. Then (Jesus) dismissed him with the stern warning.* The tone of these two verses again emphasizes the urgency of Jesus' ministry and its secrecy. Jesus desired to avoid unnecessary publicity and popularity for his work, so he quickly dismisses the man and requests a code of silence.

Verse 44: *Be sure you say nothing to anybody. Go and show yourself to the priest and make the offering laid down by Moses for your cleansing; that will certify the cure.* Jesus is referring to Leviticus 13 and 14. However, noteworthy is his attitude towards the Law that is nothing less than respect; noteworthy because at his trial, Jesus is accused of breaking the law, but quite frankly evidence is lacking. Also, Jesus does not want the credit. The cured man will more readily be accepted back into society, if the priest gives him a certificate, a clean bill of health.

Verse 45: *But the man went out and made the whole story public; he spread it far and wide, until Jesus could no longer show himself in any town, but stayed outside in the open country. Even so, people kept coming to him from all quarters.* Why did Jesus urge the man not to spread the story? I believe in part that Jesus was afraid that if the crowds became too dense, he would be unable to give effective help to any individual, and in part Jesus wanted his message to carry its own weight without the publicity of sensational stories. However, the excited man could not contain himself, and really, who could after so many years of misery now made well. Jesus attempted to avoid the type of notoriety that would distract from the basis of his message. However, it is human nature to be attracted to that which dazzles rather than the basic truth. Hear again the Gospel of Mark as read whole.

Proclamation: Some preachers like to equate leprosy with sin, which I think is wrong! I'm more interested in the cure and remedy. In every biblical reference, the cure is always found outside the afflicted person. No self-help remedies, no positive thinking, and no heal yourself antidotes are prescribed. The help and the healing are always extraneous. For instance, in today's gospel lesson, the leper seeks healing from Jesus knowing that help from him must come from outside in order to solve the problem. The point is subtle but important, because it is the fault of all of us that we criticize or blame other people for not helping themselves.

Since the biblical translation of leprosy can refer to numerous illnesses, I believe we can interpret the passage broadly. There are those "lepers" in our own country that cannot help themselves, because they are caught in tragic circumstances or social systems that are unjust. And therefore, it is the Christian's moral duty to help them. They must not be allowed to wear the social stigma and warn us to stay away with the verbal or non-verbal message: *Unclean! Unclean!* Nor should we, who can help, be afraid that our lives may be contaminated if we touch them. Who are today's lepers? Who are today's untouchables that we can minister to with the touch of compassion that Jesus has shown? I think one group are today's immigrants. We live in a diverse area that is populated with numerous nationalities. Sometimes I catch myself being critical because of the language barrier, but when I stop and think, many of today's immigrants do the work that most of us would not do. Personally, I enjoy talking to people from other cultures ... my Vietnamese barber who gives me a different perspective about the Viet Nam war ... my Korean cleaners who gives me some fresh thinking regarding the conflict with North Korea. It is also helpful for me to remember that not so long ago, my great-grandfather immigrated to this country to find hope and freedom and a secure way of life.

Two other groups that come to mind are the mentally ill and elderly in our country, who for some reason, we have a difficult time accepting responsibility for their care. I'm not making a case for socialized medicine. I am concerned that this nation's priorities shortchange a large segment of its society, because of diminished capacity or illness, and the inability to care for themselves. The sole burden should not be born by immediate families but by all. During my tenure here, it has been heart wrenching to know that some elderly can't afford to live, can't afford to die, and most certainly can't afford to get sick. The displays of obscene amounts of wealth with homelessness and the deplorable conditions of many elderly in the background are a judgment upon this nation.

But closer to home, the other "lepers" in our society are those people we label as unclean and choose to avoid out of fear of contamination. I think of those who are seriously physically or mentally ill; those who are not of our social class; those with difficult personalities; those with checkered pasts -- the high school dropout, the pregnant teenager, the alcoholic, the ones with "bad" reputations, people who are divorced, military veterans returning from war --- the list is endless. Today's "lepers" are those we exclude from our fellowship either because they chose to exclude themselves, or we have failed to go out and bring them in. As servants of Christ, we have an awesome mission -- to stretch out our hand and touch with compassion -- to be ready to receive and to provide the way to receive.

John Updike, the noted author of many books, is a very active church member. He makes no excuse for being a firm believer and attributes this to his intellectual heroes Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth, whom he quotes as having said "a drowning man cannot pull himself out by his own hair." Updike interprets this to mean, *There is no help from within – without the supernatural – the natural is a pit of horror. I believe that all problems are basically insoluble and that faith is a leap out of total despair ... at such times one has nothing but the ancient assertions of Christianity to give one the will to act.*

A young, rather innocent girl from a small country town went to seek work in a large city. She was given one of those massive forms to fill out: Name, address, family history, etc. When she came to the question, "In case of emergency, whom should we notify?" she called the personal manager over and said, "I don't understand." The manager said, "Well, you know, if some accident befell you on the job, or some emergency arose, whom should we call?" She said, "Why the nearest human being, of course."

As Jesus disciples, it is imperative that we all see ourselves as "the nearest human being." We have Jesus' teachings, we have the gospel message, and we have the power of Christ's spirit. Let us live and practice empathy by striving to be a more compassionate fellowship. The fact is ... if you think about it, in our sinful state, we are all unclean! However, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have all been made clean ... we are loved and have been made worth ... worthy enough to stand before God. Let us never forget.