

2 Kings 5:1-14
Psalm 30
1 Corinthians 9:24-27
MARK 1:40-45

“Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.” Mark 1:41 (NRSV)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In stark contrast with the healing of Naaman, where Elisha does not even come out to meet him but sends a messenger to give Naaman instructions, Jesus reaches out and touches the leper before he even says to him “I do choose. Be made clean!”

Jesus reaches out to the leper and touches him even before he answers him and says that he wills that the leper be made clean. He does the unthinkable, the unimaginable. He touches him. He touches the one who is not only diseased but an outcast who must proclaim to all that he is in exile, cast out from his family, friends, community and the presence of God. As a leper, he must constantly proclaim himself as unclean and must both avoid anyone who is clean and be avoided by all of the “clean” if they are to continue to be in relationship with God and the Covenant community. In touching the leper, Jesus makes himself ritually unclean, unholy and an outcast, but he restores the leper.

Even before he said to the man, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Jesus reached out and touched. He touched him not as a part of the curing of the disease that seems to have been done by his spoken words. He touched him out of love and compassion for him as a child of God. He touched the leper as one human touches another. It may have been years since anyone had reached out to the man in love and compassion and had touched him. If anyone had communicated with him, it had been from a distance as Elisha’s communication with Naaman had been, and most likely, the communications had not been one of love, compassion, and acceptance. If anyone had approached him, they probably felt sorry for him or approached him with fear, disgust, or judgment (what had he done to deserve such a disease). He was no longer John or Peter or a husband or a son or whoever he had been before the disease. All he was now was a person with a disease that made him an outcast.

We focus on the fact that Jesus cured the leper of his disease. But even before he did that, he did something possibly even more improbable, Jesus touched the man; he restored his humanity; he proclaimed him the beloved child of God. After he cured him, he sent him back to be a changed but full and active member of his community.

Although we may not live under a Holiness Code, such as the one found in Leviticus, that defines what and who was clean and unclean and how they should be treated, we still treat those with diseases or limitations or who are different from us in much the same way the people of Jesus’ day treated a person with leprosy. They are outcasts, and in one-way or another we marginalize them.

As disciples of Christ, we may not be able by a few words to cure someone of a dreaded disease or change all of the conditions of their life, but we can touch with love and compassion. An illustration from closer to our own time may give us some understanding of both the audacity and power of Jesus' act.

In a time when most people were afraid to even go into the room of a person with AIDS, when many considered them accursed and judged by God for something they had done, and some even rejoiced in their illness as proper retribution, one of the emotionally most powerful things that Diana, Princess of Wales, did in her life was to reach out and touch a person suffering from AIDS before the television cameras, before the world. It was the first time that someone had ever done that where millions of people could witness it. Thousands who suffered from AIDS or who had a loved one who did or who worked with and cared for those who suffered with it or who just simply cared were deeply touched and changed by that simple act of compassion and courage.

A friend of mine who works constantly for peace and social justice relates the story of attending a meeting in his home city about what to do with the poor, migrant workers who came through the area. One suggestion after another was put forth. Many of them about how to control them and keep them from harming the city that had enough problems with the poor and homeless that lived there all of the time. Finally, my friend asked if anyone had bothered to go to the migrant workers and ask them what would help? He was not surprised when no one had, but he was somewhat taken back by the fear, and uncertainty of going to them; and in some cases, the rage that was expressed that the migrant workers' thoughts and needs should even be considered.

One night last month, Tony, Rich and I spent the night at Christ Church in New Brunswick hosting the overflow from the homeless shelter. As we talked (we talked until nearly 1 a.m.) and as I kept my watch, I thought about these passages. I thought about those men, and I thought about us—you and I. And I realized that all of us are in some ways lepers. Many of us, because of race, ethnic group, disease, economic or employment status or any of a thousand other things, have been declared unclean or marginal.

I also know from looking at myself, from my work as a spiritual director and from hearing sacramental confessions, that most, probably all, of us have parts of ourselves that we consider unclean and leprous. We cannot admit them into ourselves. We cannot acknowledge them. We cannot touch them. We are broken. We all need to be touched by God's love and grace and healed.

All of us who proclaim ourselves to be Christian are called to be instruments of God's touch—God's healing. At the Ascension, Jesus said go make disciples—people disciplined in and formed by my ways. This brings me to Paul's comments in his letter to the Corinthians.

Being a disciple and formed in the ways of Jesus is not something that just happens. As Paul says, it takes work and discipline—every bit as much work and discipline as being a great athlete. There are qualities in these passages that I want to quickly raise up for our consideration to make them a part of our daily spiritual workout.

The first of these is courage. Paul said that he no longer viewed Jesus from a human perspective. I guess that I have regressed because I have moved more and more from viewing Jesus from a divine perspective to viewing him as a human. When I look at Jesus as human, one of the things that I see is a very courageous person. Yes, there was divine grace in what Jesus did, but there was also human courage. The same is true of the leper. Yes, desperation and faith were a part of what brought him to Jesus. But within his religious, social and cultural context, it took great courage for him to approach Jesus and talk to him. Many, many times in our lives as Christians, we are called upon to have great courage. If we are to be faithful disciples of Jesus, we must pray for and discipline ourselves to have courage.

The second is humility. Naaman was a very important and powerful man. He was used to having people salute him, stand aside for him and address him as “sir.” In fact, he was so important that he almost refused to be healed of leprosy because he was asked to do something that he thought was beneath him.

As the *Principles* of the Third Order put it, “Humility confesses that we have nothing that we have not received and admits the fact of our insufficiency and our dependence upon God. It is the basis of all Christian virtues. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux said, ‘No spiritual house can stand for a moment except on the foundation of humility’. It is the first condition of a joyful life within any community.”

A third spiritual virtue that I would like to hold up for our daily spiritual workout is awareness. Our society does its best to keep us entertained and distracted so that we will not be observant or aware. In most cases, we are more than willing to cooperate in this process. It is much easier to be blind to who we are, what we are doing and what is happening in us. Being aware can be painful, and we assume that pain is always to be avoided. It is often much less painful to ignore what is happening to others than to be aware and have to do something. If we really work at it, we can stay blissfully ignorant. But God calls us to be aware.

As I was preparing this sermon, I remembered the confession from the Eucharist of another Province of the Anglican Church that said, “We confess our willing ignorance of and acceptance of those things done to others to support our way of living.”

God calls us to be aware.

You see we do not worship a God who dwells in the Holy of Holies and commands us to “keep clean” so that we may approach him. We worship a God who has ripped open the heavens, come down and torn the curtain of the Temple in two from top to bottom to be among us, to touch us, to heal us. That God reaches out, touches us and says: “I do choose, Be made clean!” and then sends us out to touch others.

Amen.

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