

The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 19, 2017
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Mark 1:40-45 And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 44 and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them." 45 But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter. (ESV)

"In with Jesus"

Simple plans never turn out to be as simple as we think. You know what you need to get done today and then hope to have some down time to relax. But your work project takes three times as long to complete as you expected. Unnecessary complications keep popping up. The people you are relying on are just unresponsive. That just backs up everything else in your day and puts you behind schedule. And so the relaxing evening you had planned is out the window. You feel fortunate just to get to the end of the day with some shred of sanity. Tomorrow will be better, you promise yourself.

I can't imagine anyone felt that way more than Jesus. I mean, he had his plans, his routine his day, his route through life mapped out pretty clearly. But he was constantly getting interrupted. And this is where we see how different Jesus is than us. Jesus was all about the interruptions. I mean, he didn't see them as distractions. Because they are people. They are souls. And that's what Jesus is all about. His one, greatest desire is to see all people in with Jesus.

If you remember from the past few weeks, we have seen Jesus do some pretty incredible things here in the first chapter of Mark. As he teaches and preaches, the audiences keep swelling. As he heals diseases and drives out demons, he draws bigger crowds. He keeps pushing on, keeps moving forward with his ministry. But all of that comes to a screeching halt with the interruption we hear about today: **"And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, 'If you will, you can make me clean.'" (Mark 1:40 ESV)** The amazing part of this is that a leper would even be able to get this close to Jesus.

Maybe you've heard people describe leprosy before. It's hard to relate it to anything we would experience in normal life today. But there was a mixture of not just medical seriousness to its diagnosis, but also a certain social disdain and fear that went along with it. Maybe the closest thing we can think of is if we hear someone has been diagnosed with Ebola. We don't know if this leprosy is this one specific disease or just some sort of skin disease that would get lumped together with leprosy. But it was serious. And deadly. It would gradually eat away at a person's skin. It was extremely contagious. And there was no

known cure. So a diagnosis was basically a death sentence. Which is probably why there were reasonable medical precautions taken to avoiding contact with lepers. They had to stay out of cities. They had to announce their presence whenever anyone got close.

But you can imagine there was also a psychological isolation that went along with the medical realities. People can be cruel. And selfish. So in addition to making sure they don't contract leprosy, they would naturally pass judgment on lepers. After all, it's only logical that they must have done something to deserve this divine judgement. It's hard to find a modern parallel. But you may have a time in your past when you just felt a tremendous burden. You felt the judging eyes of other. It is enough to deal with your own issues without the added weight of condescending, pitying looks from everyone around you.

That's what makes the boldness of this leper in Mark chapter one so amazing. Somehow he got close to Jesus. There must have been crowds surrounding Jesus. There must have been people packed tightly around him hanging on his every word and waiting for his next momentous action. And yet their revulsion, their fear and loathing couldn't keep this man away from Jesus. In humility he falls on his knees before Jesus. He begs Jesus to help him. He knows Jesus can do it. It's not a matter of if, but will.

Admiring the determination of this man makes me wonder if I have done enough to get close to Jesus. If it were a matter of submitting an application you know how you would handle that. You would add up all of your positive qualities and combine that with all your greatest accomplishments. If you treat it like a job application, you might add in some iffy qualifications and just hope no one verifies what you are claiming. If it is a scholarship, you would inflate anything in your past that could help you stand out from a crowd. And if you think you're close to making the cut, you push yourself to work harder, look better, smile more, be on your best behavior.

Here's the thing. Jesus is so different than the cool kids you were so desperately trying to impress back in high school. Jesus sees through all the polish and shine down to the real you. He sees inside. And what he sees inside, makes leprosy sound like getting nicked by a razor. Last week the local paper described stolen valor charges against a local man. He had claimed honorable service in the Marine Corps. He had claimed he had received a Purple Heart. But the truth came out. It was all a lie. Deep inside your soul Jesus finds a heart that is so focused on yourself, so contaminated on your own desires, so consumed by fear of all the wrong things that there is no way you should ever deserve to get past the perimeters of Jesus' holiness. You just don't fit in with his holiness. You are left on the outside.

But notice how Jesus doesn't applaud this leper for his boldness and determination. He doesn't reward him for his moral integrity despite what people think of him. Jesus simply says: **"I am willing...Be made clean."** (Mark 1:41 HCSB) It wasn't just that Jesus was willing and able to heal this man. His primary desire was to take this outsider and bring him in. If you have a pen handy, cross off the first part of Mark 1:41 in your bulletin. Here's a good reminder that the Bible is inspired, but there is no such thing as a perfect editor or translator. It would be more accurate to begin this verse by saying "Having deep, heartfelt compassion..." Maybe this translation was trying to match up this word with the harsh tone

Jesus uses in verse 43. But this actual word here is the one for a deep emotional reaction. It's not just sympathy or kindness. It is the pained feeling at the sight of suffering. Add to that a strong desire to relieve or remove the suffering.

With Jesus, it didn't end with just feelings. The whole verse begins: "**Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out His hand and touched him.**" (Mark 1:41 HCSB) Why was Jesus willing to do what any reasonable person would have avoided? Why did he embrace this man when any normal person would have recoiled? Jesus doesn't just feel compassion. He is moved to act in compassion for this needy soul. Jesus is willing to break social taboos for the sake of this one person. What Jesus cares about most of all is relationships. Jesus wants every person in a whole and healthy relationship with God.

The touch of Jesus is so important. Jesus knows you. Jesus knows exactly what is in your heart. And that's precisely why Jesus reaches down to you beyond all the superficial shine and underneath all the efforts to puff yourself up and grab ahold of the real you. Jesus stoops down to the filth of human failure and takes hold of you. Jesus sees the real you and sees someone lost without him, unable to get on God's good side on your own. Jesus comes to you with his pristine holiness. Jesus sees all the contamination in your heart and gives you his pure heart. In your brokenness and powerlessness, Jesus says: "**I am willing...Be made clean.**" (Mark 1:41 HCSB)

And when Jesus says something, he is willing and able to make it happen. The leper was able to experience this first hand: "**And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.**" (Mark 1:42 ESV) It wasn't just the removal of the disease that was a blessing to this man. It wasn't just a display of power that would make him feel special. Now he is no longer on the outside. Now he is in with Jesus.

This weekend the NBA is having their All Star Game. Most of us will never have to wonder what it feels like to be chosen as an all star athlete. But we know what it feels like to be part of something special. Whether you made the basketball team or the orchestra or the debate team, it feels good to be chosen. When this leper had the skin disease miraculously removed, he was restored to health and restored to community. He had a relationship with Jesus and a relationship with those who had previously thought of him as an outcast and outsider.

I've never met anyone who considered themselves intolerant or judgmental. But we have to admit we look at people who are different than us as somehow threatening. We all do. It's part of human nature. Ryan White was born Dec. 6, 1971, and died April 8, 1990, one month before his high school graduation. Ryan was an American teenager from Kokomo, Indiana, who became a national poster child for those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS after being expelled from middle school because of his infection. Ryan White was a hemophiliac and in 1984 became infected with HIV from a contaminated blood treatment. Though doctors emphatically stressed that Ryan White posed no risk to others, students in his school, parents, and even teachers in Kokomo rallied against his return to the classroom. Today we know a lot more about how people contract HIV. But we have different conditions we treat with equal suspicion.

Sadly, this even happens with the way we as Christians look at people. We can't help it. We see people on the outside and have lots of doubts about them. Frozen by fear, we are paralyzed into silence. Ironically, the opposite happened in Mark chapter one. Jesus told this former leper to keep quiet about the miracle. But he couldn't help himself. Jesus calls all disciples to share the good news, but too often paralyzed in silence.

Silence is a problem. Failure to reach out and touch another soul with the good news of Jesus is dangerous. In our non-judgmental world souls are at risk when they are left to fend for themselves. There is a dizzying array of spiritual options available. Left on their own souls are left dangling without any answers, without any certainty. Left outside without Jesus.

This season of Epiphany is naturally evangelistic. Jesus was revealed as the Savior of the world to the magi. Jesus shows himself to be true God and Savior of the world little by little. But that isn't meant for just an elite, inner circle of believers. And here's the real blessing of reaching out and getting dirty with fellow sinners. We are creating opportunities to bring them in with Jesus. And not just some clique or club. We have the chance to reach out and bring them into a real and meaningful relationship with Jesus. We have the opportunity to help them reconnect with their Savior. This man cured of leprosy disrupted Jesus' plans. But we don't see Jesus strike him with a lightning bolt. This man messed up, but Jesus didn't reject him. Jesus actually used this mess up and just adjusted his ministry. Jesus uses messed up people and their messed up efforts and Jesus works it all for his ultimate purpose.

See, Jesus never sees souls as interruptions. Jesus is committed to the cure of sinful souls like you and me. Jesus is committed to reaching out for your spiritual rescue. Instead of seeking out what is easy, he goes to any length to do what is necessary to bring you into a saving relationship with God. Rather than work to maintain his own comfort, Jesus is inconvenienced by sacrificing his life to give you life. Jesus takes on your human faults and gives you his divine goodness. He did it so you could stand pure and cleansed before your heavenly Father. Jesus makes you whole and healthy to stand as a child of God. You are in with Jesus. Amen.