

A Matter of Perspective

Mark 1:40-45

February 15, 2009

I love Mark's gospel because it is so fast paced. Here we are today at the end of Chapter one, and in a mere 45 verses Mark tells us that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; he shares the story of Jesus' baptism, journey into the wilderness, and return to civilization where he promptly calls his disciples. And then one after the other, he exorcises a demon from a man in the synagogue, heals Simon Peter's mother, and cleanses a leper, returning him to society, all the while becoming more and more popular with the crowds that have begun to follow him. It takes Matthew 27 chapters, Luke 24, and John 21 to do what Mark does in 16 – to tell in narrative form, to tell as a story – the proposition Paul had been writing letters about for close to two decades before – the proposition that through the death and resurrection of Jesus we too are made alive. Paul says things like “He made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”(2Cor 5:21).

Mark just says, “Let me tell you a story.” So here in the climax of chapter one, Jesus is encountered by a leper who begs him to cleanse him so that he can return to his family. You don't have to wait until the last chapter of Mark to learn about death and resurrection; right here in chapter one is such a story. This man is as good as dead. He cannot enter the synagogue to pray; he cannot enter his family's home to eat, or sleep, or visit. He has become as if dead to society. But somehow he thinks Jesus can restore him to life. “If you choose,” he says, “you can make me clean.” He doesn't come demanding anything; he doesn't have a laundry list of items he wants Jesus to take care of; he doesn't have an agenda that he thinks Jesus should adopt for the healing of the world. “If you choose,” he says. He knows it's not his call; it's Jesus' call. This is a prayer of relinquishment; not unlike what Jesus will say later, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

And Jesus responds, “I do choose; be made clean.” Now the translation we've read today and several others as well say Jesus was moved with “pity” to cleanse this leper. But if you read down in the teeny tiny type at the bottom of your bibles, you might see a note that says “other ancient authorities read ‘anger’.” How does it change this story to hear “Moved with anger, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean.’”

Why would Jesus be angry? He's just come from healing Simon Peter's mother, and crowds were after him, but he got out early ahead of the crowd and missed their closing in on him, demanding his time, his attention, his healing. Is it possible he's angry that this man has tracked him down despite his attempts to avoid an encounter? Is it possible that he's angry that this leper has come too close to him without making the prescribed loud noises to announce himself well ahead of making an appearance as the law required? And why does Jesus speak with him “sternly” after healing him, directing him to keep quiet and go directly to the priests to show himself and to offer a sacrifice for cleansing? It just doesn't fit with the compassionate, patient, loving Jesus we think we know, does it?

There are those who say that Jesus is angry because of what the system has done to this man, angry that he has been dehumanized and ostracized because of an illness, because of fear, because of social custom and religious laws. That would make his a righteous indignation, in the same vein as when later on he chastised the money changers in the temple and said they'd turned God's house into a den for thieves.

That explanation feels good to me – to think of Jesus' righteous indignation at the unfairness of life, at the prejudice this man has experienced through no fault of his own. It feels good to me to see Jesus' hand outstretched to this outcast, to see the power of touch heal another

person and restore him to his rightful place in a society that had turned its back on him. It feels good to hear Jesus issue what could be seen as a challenge to the powers that be – go back to those priests, those authorities who told you that you weren't good enough – and show them Show them who you are; show them that you are whole. Show them that you are healed. Show them that you are as good as they are. Make them acknowledge your common humanity.

There's not much that feels better, I suppose, than righteous indignation! Righteous anger has taken on many abuses, many injustices, and has fired many hearts to go forth to do battle for what is right and true. I can remember back in the '60's, with knees knocking and voice trembling, giving a speech in a required course, Public Speaking 101 about the evils of racially or religiously charged humor; taking to task those who made fun of a person or group of people because of the color of their skin, or their ethnicity, or their religious beliefs. It was, after all, the age of the civil rights movement, not to mention the height of popularity of the Polish joke! And putting people down for who they are really made me mad. I've always had that spark in me; I can remember my husband asking me once when we were teaching at Union College, and I was involved in battling some inequity on campus, "Can't you just teach your classes, mind your own business, and come home?" And telling him, "No, that's not how I am. I can't NOT do anything." And one of the things I love about this church is the courage that many of you have to speak out when you think something isn't right in our community, and to get involved in working to change things for the better.

And so in this story, I am tempted sorely to identify with Jesus, the fearless righter of wrongs; maybe you are too. But then, it's always easier, isn't it, to identify with the savior than with the saved. However, I think maybe my proper place today is on my knees beside the leper. And I think the only way I can be a spokesperson for Christ, as that leper was after his healing, is for me to recognize my own need to be healed. And all of us need that healing. Let's not kid ourselves. None of us makes it through life without being wounded, without knowing some kind of isolation, or rejection, some kind of prejudice or oppression – subtle or not so subtle – being made to feel that we're not good enough, or that we don't quite measure up in some way. Even parents in the most loving families do that with the best of intentions – I can remember coming home with all "A"s and one "B" on my report card and being asked, "Why the B?" My Dad wanted to encourage me to be an achiever, but instead at that moment I felt like a failure. There are many ways in which our society, our culture, even our family or friends can make us feel "less than." And we do the same thing, sometimes intentionally but mostly inadvertently, to others. Frederick Buechner has said "In so many ways we move through our lives like lepers, the untouchable ones, the unclean ones, afraid to touch others people's lives and let our lives be touched by other people, ashamed of ourselves, suspicious of others."¹

So what if we go back to this story and look at it from a different position – not from Jesus' perspective, looking down at the leper and possessing the power to make a difference, but from the leper's perspective, on our knees, looking up, powerless to effect change in our lives, saying to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." What difference does that make in how we see this story? What difference does it make to feel powerless, helpless, rejected, cast off, unsure, unwanted, unloved, ashamed? And then in that hopeless state to be touched by Jesus, who says "I do choose. Be made clean."

Ironically, in touching the leper and cleansing him, Jesus became, according to the custom of his day, unclean himself. In a sense, he took the leper's place; or as Paul might have said, he who knew no sin became sin so that this leper might become the righteousness of God. Jesus, Mark said "could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country," while the leper went back to the community and began to proclaim freely to everyone that he'd been healed.

Roberta Bondi, writes in her book *Memories of God*, that she came to realize one Easter “what Jesus as the privileged one of God, as God’s own self, had chosen to do by casting his lot . . . with all women and men the world would shame and reduce to nothing for simply being who they are.” And she imagined him saying, “A bruised reed, I will not break you; a smoldering wick, I will never quench you. I hate the shame that binds you and destroys you, and I will prove it to you and to the world by casting in my lot with you even so far as to die a death the world finds shameful. By showing you the source and meaning of your shame, I will make a space for you to breathe and thrive. This is what I, Jesus, as a human being in the image of God, and as God’s own self, choose with great joy.”²

This story of the leper is a story of death and resurrection. It has the same meaning as when Paul says “I have been crucified with Christ,” or when he says “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,” or that through Christ we have become “the righteousness of God.” Once we have been raised with Christ and by Christ, once we have been healed by the hand of one who says to us “I do choose, be made clean,” only then we can go out like the former leper did, only then do we have the proper bona fides – “to proclaim freely, and to spread the word,” to share the good news and in some sense to become the good news. Cleansed by the love of God working among us and within us we can take on the powers and principalities, champion the cause of those yet bound, and express our righteous anger, because we ourselves, through the power and love of God, have been made right. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Frederich Buechner, “A Moment of Grace,” Thirty Good Minutes, Program #3601, October 4, 1992.

² Roberta Bondi, *Memories of God* (Nashville: Abindgon Press, 1995), 143-144.