

Epiphany VI February 15, 2009

For the last couple of Sundays, I've been preaching about the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, the story of a busy day in the life of Jesus, a day that is really an extended introduction to the entire Gospel. All of this, Chapter One is saying, is what it was like, all of this is what Jesus was like.

The chapter closes with the story we just heard—Jesus cleansing the leper. It's an important story, and it's deliberately crafted with the *other* leper story we heard, the one with Naaman, very much in mind.

“A leper came to him, begging Jesus.” Now, being a leper was something very special, and very terrible, in Israel. Scholars today are not really sure exactly what diseases were intended, or described, by the word ‘leper’. In fact, there is even debate over whether or not what we now call leprosy, or Hansen's disease, was even included in the broad category of skin and related ailments that are so carefully, almost lovingly, described in Leviticus.

But whatever it was, leprosy was seen as pretty much the worst thing that could happen to you. To be a leper was not only, (or even, perhaps, not mainly), to have a potentially horrible disease. To be a leper was to be defiled; it was to be cut off from every part of human society—from all the things that give richness and depth and meaning to life. To be a leper was to be cast out and isolated. Lepers had to warn people that they were coming, and they had to stand at a distance, apart, so decent folks would have a chance to get out of the way, and avoid looking at them or dealing with them.

Even worse, to be a leper, everyone knew, was to be shunned by God—to be rejected even by the creator, and cursed in a special and devastating way. To have leprosy was to not really to be sick; it was to be unclean.

In fact, the Bible never talks about lepers who are healed—it talks about lepers who are made clean. Think about it; that’s a big difference.

This difference between regular disease and leprosy is a little bit like the modern distinction between guilt and shame. Guilt has to do with feeling bad about, and regretting, something we have done, some action of ours. Guilt can be an appropriate and useful thing; and it’s something we know other people share, and know about. Guilt can be healed by forgiveness. Shame, on the other hand, has to do with a sense that it is not just our actions, but our very *selves*, the very core of who we are, that is evil, and stained, and wrong. To be truly ashamed is to feel apart from everyone else; to be somehow beneath the common lot of humanity. Unlike guilt, shame is always destructive, it always distorts. (By the way, shame is only healed by relationship.) In just this way, in Jesus’ day, to be a leper was not to *have* an illness, it was to *be* an abomination.

And they thought it was catching. Not just the disease, but the uncleanness that was the real issue. That’s why normal people couldn’t even get close to lepers; they couldn’t walk along the road, or share a meal, or touch, or have a conversation, with one. To do these things would make you unclean. Whether you got the disease or not, you shared the uncleanness, the basic wrongness, of the leper—at least for a while.

This is who came to Jesus begging for help. This is why this story is different from the other healings, from the folks like Peter’s mother-in-law and the people in the crowds who had all sorts of other diseases.

This one is different. This leper, like Naaman in the first reading, stands at the prescribed distance and shouts to Jesus about being made clean.

What happens next is especially important—it's the image of Jesus that Mark wants you to grab and to hold on to. You see, Jesus could have fixed the leper the old way—he could have cleansed him the way Elisha did, safely and from a distance, to show that God had power. Or he could have done it the way Naaman wanted, with great wavings of hands and elaborate incantations and dancing about—to show, I guess, that God not only had power, but that he also had some style.

Jesus could have done it any of those ways.

Instead, Jesus did something new. He reached out and touched the man. Now, that wasn't easy. Jesus had to walk, he had to move several paces to where the leper was—because the leper could not move to within touching distance himself, that was not allowed. Jesus had to move there, and he had to reach—he had to reach through all those centuries of fear and shame and law—of repulsion and of hostility; he had to reach through the self-righteousness, and the smugness that can come from being well, from at least not being like *them*. Jesus had to reach through all of that; he had to become ritually unclean himself, before he could reach that leper.

But that's what he did. And when he did that, the old ways were gone forever; and Jesus was showing, not mainly that God was powerful or that God was flashy, but that God was *here*, right here, right where you are, right where the leper was; and he was showing that God would stop at nothing, absolutely nothing, to make even the most defiled clean, and new again.

Touching lepers. That's the image, the impression, that Mark wants us to have of what Jesus was like, and of what Jesus did.

It's a wonderful snapshot of Jesus' ministry, of his life. He walked those extra steps it took to get there; he reached out through whatever was in the way; and he took the uncleanness upon himself, so that we could be, not just healed, but restored, and have even the shame taken away.

That's still how it works, the same way; but there's a difference now. The difference is that we figure into it now, the Church figures into it now.

We figure into it now, first, because this is what has happened to us. We have been touched, we have been made clean. That's what Jesus has done for us. Even the worst parts of us, the leprous parts, the secret, hidden and shameful parts, these have been touched by our Lord, and whatever had been wrong with us he has taken upon himself, and conquered. He did that, and here we are. That's first.

The second way we figure into it now is that this picture Mark gives us of Jesus' ministry is also a model to us for our lives and our ministries. This is what it can be like for us to live as we are called to live. It can look like touching lepers, like taking those steps, and reaching through whatever is in the way—including either, or both, our revulsion and our self-righteousness—and touching the ones who are placed in our path, and who come to us needing the embrace of Christ.

Now, there is no telling what the details of this will look like for each or for any of us. But taking seriously this picture of Jesus touching lepers can make sense of both who God has been, and is still being, toward us, and of who God will have us be in relationship to one another, and to the world we are given to serve.

It was a big deal, back then, touching a leper. It still is. And it's about us.