

Touching the 'Untouchable'

Mark 1:40-45
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Jesus was a rule breaker! This may come as quite a surprise to many of the WWJD "What Would Jesus Do" folks. But it's true. Numerous stories throughout the gospels reveal that **Jesus regularly violated political, social, religious and ritual norms and boundaries.** Today's Gospel Lesson from Mark 1, where Jesus actually touches, heals and restores a person with leprosy to wholeness, is a classic and dramatic example.

Most healing stories in the New Testament focus not so much on the disease itself, but on the person and power of Jesus. An important exception to this general state of affairs, however, involves the disease of **leprosy.**

In the ancient world, leprosy was not only a severe medical condition, but also a disease that came with a particular theological understanding. For instance, people tended to interpret leprosy as God's punishment for sin. **There are far too many people in our day and age, in my opinion, who jump to the same erroneous conclusion – that when they get sick or face some disease, God is punishing them for their sinfulness.** (That's not to say, however, that we don't have consequences to pay for the choices we make.) In an extreme example, look how many religious leaders claimed that HIV/AIDS was divine punishment. But that's another sermon.

Leprosy, which referred to any number of skin ailments, was one of the greatest violations of ritual purity laws. This particular physical ailment, therefore, also carried severe social and spiritual consequences.

Now for those of you who really want to get into the gory details of what the ancient Israelites thought about leprosy, I'd like to direct you to chapters 13 and 14 (two full chapters!) of our favorite book of the Bible, Leviticus. Leviticus, as you may recall, is a book in the Torah (the first 5 books in the Hebrew Bible, which we call the Old Testament).

Leviticus is dedicated to what is known as the ancient Purity Code. It delineated what was socially and religiously 'clean' and 'unclean'. In other words, who's 'in' and who's 'out'. Here's a lovely little sample from chapter 13:

When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests... After the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean.

Notice that it is a priest, not a physician, doing the examination. And notice that the religious leader pronounces not only a medical diagnosis, but a spiritual diagnosis (“unclean”) as well. Leviticus continues:

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

Leprosy was the ultimate ‘scarlet letter’. That’s because persons who were declared ‘unclean’ were banished from the community. They were cast out and isolated from family and friends. Very significantly, they were also excluded from public worship.

I want us to take note that in Mark’s story, **the man with leprosy does not ask to be ‘cured’ (which is a medical request), but to be ‘made clean’ (a social and spiritual request).**

To be declared ‘clean’ meant that the sufferer could once again live and worship with others. Social and religious acceptability, the restoration of one’s spiritual and social status, seemed, therefore, to be even more important to the person who suffered from leprosy than physical healing itself.

Perhaps something similar is true for us today, a parallel that we can make in our own society and culture and church. **While the physical healing of an illness is always important to us, so is the sense that we aren’t considered by others to be social and religious outcasts.**

It is also very significant to note that Jesus actually touches the person who suffered from leprosy and came to Jesus to be made clean.

I want to make a side comment at this point. I have intentionally distinguished between saying “the leper” and “the person who suffered from leprosy.” There is a big difference. The former designation categorically describes someone’s identity. The latter recognized the personhood of the one afflicted with a disease.

As another example, there is a negative judgment almost automatically attached to someone who is described as “that alcoholic” as opposed to “that person who suffers from the medical condition of alcohol abuse.” **Let us be careful, therefore, to recognize the personhood of all people, especially those who suffer.**

Getting back to our story, the purity laws were clear that if Jesus were to touch an unclean person, he himself would become ritually unclean as a result. To be ‘unclean’ carried with it the understanding of being contagious. In a remarkably ironic plot twist, which is easy to miss in this story, we learn that **it is not ‘the leper’ (negative connotation intended) who is contagious, but Jesus.** Think about it.

In a reversal of the purity code standards, the person who suffered from leprosy does not transmit his uncleanness to Jesus, but rather Jesus transmits his

wholeness and spiritual cleanliness (holiness) to this person in need, and makes him clean – physically, spiritually, and socially.

In this story, being touched by Jesus – by God – means that the outcast's isolation and very humanity are restored. By extension, then, being touched by God restores our isolation and humanity as well!

If the Gospels teach us anything about Jesus, it is that he regarded human need as more important than following religious and societal rituals and regulations.

Jesus did not minister long distance, safe from all that plagued the lives of those he would help. **Jesus' ministry brought him in direct contact with sinners and outcasts and those in need. Again, using Jesus' ministry as a guide for our own, should not our ministry do the same?**

Jesus' work of lifting others up placed him among the fallen. His words of encouragement were given in the presence of those without hope. His ability to heal put him in contact with those who suffered. That model of ministry, which many like to refer to as a ministry of presence, has direct implications for all of us, and especially for the role of the church. For instance, it's one thing (however necessary) to send money or even supplies to organizations that help the needy. It's quite another thing, however, to directly face and touch the lives of those in need.

How often, in all honesty, do we come into direct contact with those whom society labels as untouchable, undesirable and unacceptable; those who have been ostracized, stigmatized, and cast out to the very fringes of society? The following question begs to be asked: **Who are you and I afraid to touch – and not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well?**

Do we not all have our own boundary issues; things outside our comfort zone; people whom we think will somehow 'contaminate' us? Yet as Jesus demonstrated, we are called to touch the untouchable and those who are forgotten or denied or considered outcasts in our own communities?

I'll let you come up with your own list of those whom our society tends to throw into that category of "lepers" in our day and time. But let's not think that we're immune from doing this as well. As I have stated for years, **just because we are inclusive of those that others exclude, doesn't necessarily make us all-inclusive.**

What we learn from this biblical story is that following Jesus would have us remove societal- and self-imposed boundaries that act to separate anyone from God and each other. For God works outside the boundaries and boxes that organized religion continues to try to force God into. Or as one biblical commentator writes, "God continues to color outside the lines." God reaches out to touch the untouchable, and so should we. No one should be made to 'live outside the camp.'

So I pray that we here at College Hill will continue to increase our compassion for those whom others label as 'unclean' and unacceptable,

seeking to accept them as *already* included in God's gracious embrace and care.

And concerning this issue of touch, biblical commentator Kathy Galloway writes:

We know in our daily lives that it is often touch, the hand on the shoulder, the hug of a friend, the cuddle of a child, that lets us know that we are loved. Touch, often more than words, is a way of giving physical expression to our prayers and concern for each other.

And though we always need to be cognizant of the appropriateness or not of touching someone else, **perhaps you know someone today who needs to be reached out to. Perhaps you are that person who needs to make yourself available to be reached out to by another.**

For I know of no human being, including ourselves, that at times doesn't feel like the one cast into the 'untouchable' or 'unclean' category; times in our lives when we have felt like a 'leper.' When that is the case, let us allow ourselves to be touched by God, and by others.

And let us, like Jesus, be a rule breaker so that we might touch the untouchable.

Amen.