

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Mark 1:40-45
“Come and see a God of healing and redemption”
February 15, 2009

Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." [41] Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" [42] Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. [43] After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, [44] saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." [45] But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

I never tire of hearing these stories of Jesus healing the lepers. Of course, I know next to nothing of leprosy on a first hand basis. Actually, the leprosy spoken of in the Bible referred to a variety of skin conditions, which may not have been associated with what we know of leprosy or Hansen's disease, today. In Biblical times, I could very well have been diagnosed with leprosy, because I have a skin condition called “**seborrheic dermatitis.**” You folks suffering from eczema might be in trouble, too. While I contemplated spending some time speaking this morning about leprosy, both as it was understood in the Bible and what we scientifically know about it today, I realize that none of this really matters.

What matters is to remember that to be diagnosed with leprosy in the Bible, was to be cut off from family, friends, and community. According to the book of Leviticus, a leper was to wear torn clothing, has disheveled hair, and covers the mouth while calling out, “Unclean, unclean!” Furthermore, the leper was to live outside the camp, all alone. And so, we enter this story, where a leper who is so beaten down and empty, because of how he has been defined by others, begs Jesus to do something. I am especially taken by his choice of words: *"If you choose, you can make me clean."*

I can tell you that part of the purpose Mark has in telling this story, in the very first chapter of the gospel, is that these healing stories are to establish Jesus as a man of action. Mark is an action-adventure gospel, where Jesus does not just teach, but acts. More than any other gospel, Mark emphasizes the miracles, healings, and exorcisms of Jesus. Approximately 1/3 of the verses in all of Mark recount miracles. This story, however, is not intended to amaze and astound. It is inviting us to ask, “What does this miracle mean?”

After all, this world is still full of lepers. I am not merely referring to *untouchables*, however we may define them. I am talking about people, wandering out of dislocation—rootless, hopeless and lonely. Some wear their ailment; others hide it carefully. They may be sitting beside you right now or live next door to you.

What does this miracle mean? This is a miracle about choices. “If you choose...”

Choosing has been on my brain lately. The team of church members going to Hungary in April, has elected the word “choose” as part of their theme. It is based on the verse from Joshua 24:15 – “*Choose you this day whom you will serve.*” Romany or gypsy children, whom we will be serving with Glen and Clista Adkins, are the lepers of Hungary. Marginalized and outcast, they have very few choices in society, but they do have the opportunity to make healthy choices, especially in the area of morality. We want to help Glen and Clista strengthen these “outcasts,” in order to make good choices that will positively affect their future.

This miracle is about choices. “If you choose...” says the leper. Actually, the leper makes the first choice by turning to Jesus in the first place...maybe out of desperation. He chose to believe that Jesus could do something. It is with a note of both frustration and confidence that he says to Jesus, *if you choose.*

He knows what it is like to be broken. He also believes that God can do something about it. Notice what he doesn't ask for. He doesn't ask for healing. He asks to be made clean, that is, to be brought back into the community. What I really like in this story of choices is that Jesus chooses right back. *I do choose.*

Notice too, how Jesus responds. He stretched out his hand and touched him. According to custom and Biblical law, this would have made Jesus unclean. You cannot do that in proper society. It was risky for they believed you too, could get the disease. Jesus reached beyond custom, beyond ritual, beyond prohibitions, beyond decorum and touched the man and created holy space, a sacred encounter. A Biblical scholar writes: "*God's presence creates holiness.*" (NIB, p. 545)

God does choose to participate, and be with the suffering, the dispossessed and the isolated. God does choose, even when the world chooses to change the channel and to look the other way, or dismiss. There is the choice of the leper to turn to Jesus, the choice of Jesus to participate and be with the suffering, and finally there is our choice, to respond. How will we choose to respond?

Recall what I said earlier, Mark is an action-adventure Gospel. Jesus not only teaches others the way, but he shows us the way.

So how are we to go about cleansing the lepers, healing the sick, and so on? We are beginning to see a model for ministry in this brief, economically told story?

Yesterday, I finished a novel that many of you have probably read: *Siddhartha*. It was first published 1922 and is required reading for many English literature classes. Set in India, Siddhartha is the son of a Brahmin, on a life-long quest for enlightenment. Towards middle age he has made choices to live as an ascetic, and then to seek after every pleasure, both leading to frustration. Now, he lives with a simple man who ferries people back and forth across a river. Siddhartha is a learned man and has joined with the great teachers of his time, but has not found peace for himself. This simple man who pilots the boat, however, becomes his greatest teacher in his humility. In the book, the ferryman says to Siddhartha: "Look, I am no scholar, I do not know how to speak, nor do I know how to think...If I could talk and teach I might be a sage, but, I am only a ferryman, and my task is to ferry people across this river. I have ferried many across, thousands, and for all of them, my river has been nothing but a hindrance in their travels. They traveled for money and business, to weddings and pilgrimages, and the river was in their way and the ferryman was there to get them swiftly across their hindrances. But for a few among the thousands...the river was no hindrance. They heard its voice, they listened to it, and the river became sacred to them, as it is for me..." (p. 93)

This world of lepers and seekers and outcasts, is in need of people willing to ferry one another across the obstacles of this world, to join with them in their woundedness and journey with them to the other side.

If we are this "City on a Hill" and commissioned to teach, share, and be, this means that our ministries have a "healing" quality to them.

This is not to be confused that we ourselves have it all together, not at all. For we still carry within us the woundedness and fragmentations of a dislocated world, as well as our own hurts, pains, and baggage.

In fact, it is precisely because we do know of our own sicknesses to use the Gospel text, that authorizes us as having something genuine to offer. Henri Nouwen writes that our service of healing "will not be perceived as authentic, unless it comes from a heart wounded by the suffering about which he [sic] speaks." (*The Wounded Healer*).

This is not some charge to go and be "therapeutic," in the name of Jesus for others. Rather, it is a commissioning to engage the brokenness of this world, and the brokenness of others, as if believing that Jesus actually has come to bring about wholeness.

We claim as our mission: *To love the Lord and share his life with our community and world.* We are that city on a hill that cannot be hid. It is an evangelical statement, that begins with the assumption that - like the leper - there is a world full of people who are cut off from the Good News – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Each day, people pass through our doors and through the doors of countless churches and make the same request of the leper: “*If you choose, you can make me clean.*” In other words, they want a miracle, and they hope that First Baptist Church has one for them.

And if we fail in compassion and concern, we are in effect stating that no Good News can be found here. Not in my life and not in my church.

We take up the work of sharing good news, and reminding people through what we say and do, that God does desire that his creation rise above the muck and mire of sickness and alienation of sin and separation. Others are wanting to know, is First Baptist willing, will we choose?

Many years ago there was a man filled with wisdom and knowledge - he was a writer, a scientist, and a poet. It was his practice to go to the ocean to do his writing, but before his work, he would walk upon the beach. One day, as he was walking along the shore, he looked down the beach and saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself to think of someone who would dance to the day, so he began to walk faster to catch up. As he got closer, he saw that it was a young man, and the young man wasn't dancing, but instead he was reaching down to the shore picking up something...and gently throwing it into the ocean. As he got closer he called out, “Good morning...what are you doing?” The young man paused...looked up and replied “throwing starfish into the ocean.” The poet asked incredulously, “Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?” “Well,” said the young man, “The sun is up, the tide is out, and if you don't throw them back into the water, they will die.” “But young man, don't you realize that there are miles of beach and starfish all along it. You can't possibly make a difference.” The young man listened politely, and then bent down and picked up another starfish and he threw it into the sea past the breaking waves. He replied to the man full of wisdom and knowledge, “It made a difference for that one.”

His response surprised the man. He was upset and he didn't know how to reply, so instead he turned away and went back to the cottage to begin his writings.

All day long as he wrote, the image of that young man haunted him. He tried to ignore it, but the vision persisted.

Late in the afternoon, he came to realize that he - the scientist, the poet - had missed the essential nature of the young man's actions. He realized that what the young man was doing, was choosing not to be an observer in the universe and watch it pass by, but choosing to be an actor in the universe and make a difference. He was embarrassed and went to bed troubled....

When morning came, he awoke, knowing that he had to do something. So he got up...put on his clothes...and walked down to the beach...He found the young man...and with him, he spent the morning throwing starfish in the ocean.

Jesus changed the world by changing one life at a time: a leper, a blind man, a doubting Pharisee, a wayward disciple. The vision stuck. “If you choose...I do choose.” What will be your choice?