

Choosing Compassion

Mark 1:40-45

February 15, 2009

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him,
“If you choose, you can make me clean.”

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and
said to him,

“I do choose. Be made clean!”

Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After
sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 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.”

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.

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This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

For Christmas, our son Wells received a children's Bible from his great-grandfather. It was a great gift. The stories are appropriate for children Wells' age; they are short, they cut out some of the fancy words, and there are plenty of illustrations.

All the same, I will say that one of the consequences of a truncated Bible is that the only way that Wells knows of Jesus Christ is through his identification of our Lord as "baby Jesus." He got his Bible at Christmas; that is what the pictures show. Sweet Little Baby Jesus.

And that is fine. But it also foreshadows for me one of the hard parts of bringing a child up in the faith – that is, I know there will come a time when we will have to teach Wells that Jesus is not always sweet, little, or a baby.

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In today's passage from Mark we meet Jesus outside of town, being approached by a leper for another one of his fame-generating healings. This is the third healing in the first chapter of Mark's gospel. The first one happened in the synagogue, the second one (Sarah preached on it last week) – in a house; today Jesus is on the outskirts of town where the lepers and other unclean people are banished.

The synagogue, the house, the outskirts of town. A journey from the center to the margins.¹ It's no accident. There is meaning in the way Mark tells his story.

If there is one thing clear in Mark's account of Jesus' life it is that God will not be domesticated. Mark doesn't even bother with the story of sweetlittlebabyjesus. The gospel of Mark is book-ended by two events that tell us a lot about what Jesus' ministry on this earth means. In the beginning of the gospel, Mark tells the story of Jesus baptism. When Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens *torn* open – and a voice said, "You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

At the end of Mark's gospel and Jesus' ministry, when Jesus breathed his last breath on the cross, the curtain in the temple...the curtain that

¹ Ortega, Ofelia, *Feasting on the Word* (WJK, Louisville, 2008) pp. 356-360.

separated the holy from the secular; the priest from the congregation; God from the people of God – was *torn*. *Ripped*. Top to bottom – evidence of the fact that through Jesus Christ we have access to God; and God has access to us.

Throughout Mark it is clear that Jesus is not interested in the boundaries that separate people from one another or from God. I don't need to tell you that this was one of the reasons why Jesus was perceived as a threat to the religious establishment. The laws that Jesus broke, time and time again, were laws that were intended to preserve order, purity, reverence, and the status quo. Indeed, Jesus challenging the establishment was what paved the way to the cross.

Today is another example. The leper that approached Jesus said a lot with few words. "If you choose, you can make me clean." It is an expression of faith: there is an acknowledgment that Jesus has the power to heal. It is an expression of cultural awareness: it was forbidden, by the law and the religious establishment, to touch someone who was unclean. It is an expression that challenges Jesus to make a decision: between what is expected and what is right.

"If you choose, you can make me clean."

Jesus made the right choice.

The text says that Jesus was moved with pity. Really, there aren't enough words in the English language to describe what Jesus really felt. It was complicated. There were consequences. There were laws and traditions to consider. But when you are faced with a request for compassion you don't always have time to think.

Jesus was moved by an emotion that propelled him beyond the fear of any of these consequences – so he reached out, he touched this one who was unclean, and he made him well. And then he did something else. He sent the formerly unclean leper back to the priest – right back to the person who had ordered him abolished to the outskirts of town – right back to the person who was concerned more about purity than about healing, more concerned about the letter of the law than the spirit of the law – to demonstrate to the religious

establishment that there was a new game in town, and his name was Jesus.²

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Before I get too worked up about the religious establishment, let me acknowledge the irony of me...a well-educated, bespectacled, white, male – in my robe – in the pulpit of The First Presbyterian Church of Shreveport...making that observation. I mean, let's be honest, we are the religious establishment. And it is from the place of understanding the desire for order, and tradition, and other establishment virtues that we come to this text.

In preparation for this sermon, I thought of a favorite character of mine from the silver screen. His name is Comte de Reynard who is the Mayor of a tiny French village in the movie *Chocolat*.

Comte de Reynard is a man who loves order, a man who likes tradition, and a man who dislikes change. Besides being mayor, he is extremely active in the local church. In his view, the role of the church is to promote the status-quo stability for the village; to protect the establishment and to resist outsiders. The movie opens with a new single mother named Vianne coming into town to open a positively temptuous chocolate shop. Not only does Vianne not come to church, she opens her shop during Lent – a clear provocation of the social and religious order.

Much of the movie centers around the tension between Comte de Reynard and Vianne. Beyond opening the forbidden chocolate shop during Lent, Vianne adds insult to injury by reaching out to newcomers and drifters – folks who would otherwise be shunned by the community and left on the outskirts of town. To Comte de Reynard, their inclusion is a threat to the purity of the village and the church. Near the end of the movie, tortured by his own demons and unable to control his obsession with maintaining purity – he breaks down in helpless rage by eating his way through Vianne's inventory of chocolate in a last ditch effort to control this agent of inclusion and change. The morning after, as he awakens in Vianne's storefront

² In my study, I was helped by both Dr. Brian Blount and the Rev. Gary Charles (both in *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, and in *Feasting on the Word*).

window – head pounding from a chocolate hangover, ashamed and disgraced, the bells of the steeple chime in Easter morning. And the church and the village are never the same.

I find Comte de Reynard a sympathetic figure because he thinks he is being virtuous. As establishment-type folks, we can empathize with him well. Yet his view of the church as the agent of social respectability and purity is misguided and not rooted in the witness of scripture.

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It is easy to read today's passage as an admonition for the church to reach out to the margins – just like Jesus did – and engage those who the rest of society deems unclean. Too easy. Of course that is what the church should do. And by looking around – it becomes pretty clear that we need to do a better job.

But deeper than that, this text challenges us to stop pretending that the religious establishment that we have become is without its share of broken-down, impure, and ashamed people in need Jesus' touch.

One of the privileges that comes with being a pastor of a church is that, after a while, people trust you with the storms that rage within. Over the course of my ministry, I have had many conversations with folks who have come to me ashamed and alarmed about a feeling, or an action, or a habit, or an addiction, or a belief that makes them feel unworthy and impure. In almost every conversation there is an assumption that they are the only one that has felt that way; as if no one else in the established church of which they are a member has had a similar experience.

What is sad is that most people only voice their concern to the pastor. It suggests to me that the impression of the established church is that we are not a safe place to be honest about what really troubles us – for fear of being rejected and ostracized; banished to the outskirts of town. The truth is, I think we are all complicit in perpetuating that impression. Members, leaders, and – to be absolutely certain – pastors. Too often, we feign purity to avoid talking about the things that are difficult.

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The good news is that Jesus isn't concerned about the boundaries that we create to separate the impure from the pure. When faced with a choice between protecting the laws that enforced the boundaries of purity and a request for an act of compassion – Jesus chose compassion. And that is what he wants the church to choose, too.

A scholar on the book of Mark talks about this – this very human and very establishment-driven need to create a buffer between the pure and the impure; the holy and the unholy – with the institution of the church. He describes as myth the belief that by separating the clean from the unclean – the church can protect purity. Instead, he says this:

In [Jesus'] crazy classroom of convoluted kingdom calculus, uncleanness plus uncleanness didn't add up to even greater uncleanness, it added up to wholeness. That's why when Jesus touched the leper, he didn't *get* leprosy, but the leprosy *got* transformed. That's why when Jesus sat down with tax collectors and sinners he didn't get *taken*, he *took* them with him on his journey to Jerusalem as disciples. That's why when Jesus broke the Sabbath laws in order to feed the hungry and heal the sick, he didn't end up on the *wrong side of God*, he ended up showing his people the *right side of the law* they'd forgotten, the side that serves God's people and doesn't make God's people bow down and worship it.³

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As the church – with Jesus Christ as its head – we are gathered here not because we deserve to be here, nor because we are more worthy than those who are not gathered here. We are here because God calls us – the broken, the frail, the ashamed, the weak. We are here because in Jesus Christ, God has chosen to make us clean.

Thanks be to God for that.

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Amen.

³ Blount, Brian, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (WJK, Louisville, 2002), p. 34.