

From Rev. Dr. Ian McPhee: Folks, sorry to be so late getting the service posted but because of the snow we only recorded today instead of Saturday. Thanks again to Sandra, Heather, Steve, Elaine and the girls, Eva and Abby for being part of our service today. The links are:

<https://www.facebook.com/WestFlamChurch/>

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCneF9IOARvh5R30Fzm-1ySA?view_as=subscriber

Healing of the Leper
Mark 1:40-45
February 14, 2021

We pick up from last week's story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and the crowds that swarmed around the door in the evening-after the Sabbath. We noticed also that Jesus went out early in the morning to a deserted place to meditate and pray. The disciples came, we are told, "hunting for him". And when they found him, they said: ***Everyone is searching for you.*** His response to them will be an important clue regarding his emotions in the encounter with the leper. Jesus tells his disciples that they need to get going to all the towns in Galilee because that's what he came to do. Mark then tells us that Jesus went throughout Galilee proclaiming the message in the synagogues and casting out demons. This, he reminded them, is what I came to do!

At some point in this journey through Galilee he meets a leper. Leprosy was a feared disease and could refer to all kinds of skin ailments. And there is a history of leprosy throughout the Old Testament: Miriam, Moses' sister was afflicted when she and her brother Aaron spoke out against Moses; Naaman, the commander of the army of Aram and a powerful man admired by the king, was afflicted by leprosy. We read part of this story in second Kings. It tells us that a young Israel girl was captured and served her mistress, Naaman's wife. She told her that if Naaman were to go to Samaria and speak to the prophet Elisha he would be healed. The king granted him permission and he went to Elisha with a letter from the king and a substantial amount of treasure. The prophet told him to wash seven times in the Jordan and he would be healed. Naaman's response initially was anger, but, after being persuaded by his servants, he did as prescribed. And we are told that his flesh became "like the flesh of a young

boy". These and many other examples remind us just how prevalent this disease was in biblical times.

Also, we notice that the law devoted two long chapters to this disease and regulations for the priest to follow. Leviticus chapters 13 through 14 set out in great detail how to diagnose skin issues and how the priest is to treat them. In Jesus' day there remained no cure. It was considered highly communicable, so much so that lepers were required to live in isolation. A leper must live separate, wear torn clothes, cover his upper lip and cry out "unclean, unclean". This was their fate for life!

As I reflected on this story it brought back to me my own father's skin condition. It actually came to me in the middle of the night. He was born with a terrible skin disease which became more noticeable as he got older. His entire body was eventually covered with bumps and his face was disfigured by them. I remember watching him trying to shave with his straight razor; it must have been difficult. Three of us brothers didn't inherit the disease. But my brother Nicol did but not as disfiguring as my dad's. As a teenager I remember how embarrassed I was of my father and never wanted to be with him when my friends were around. I feel so terrible about that now. I don't think I've seen anyone since that who had this condition.

There is a powerful depiction of this tragic disease and its affect on families. In the film Ben Hur (1959) Judah, a wealthy Jewish prince visits the cave where his mother and sister, who are lepers, are forced to live. He is prevented from going in to see them. Later he returns with Esther to the leper colony, reveals himself to Miriam and learns that his sister is dying. They take them to see Jesus, but the Jesus is already on his way to the cross. They witness the crucifixion and his mother and sister are miraculously healed by the presence of Jesus, even on the cross.

Leprosy therefore had multiple dimensions—medical, religious, social and financial. The afflicted person was considered to be ritually unclean. Lepers were required to live alone and to maintain a distance of fifty paces from other people. If the leper touched another person or was touched by them, the other person was considered to be diseased and ritually unclean until examined by a priest and pronounced clean. The afflicted person was unable to work, and was thus reduced to begging. Most likely his family was also reduced to begging. Leprosy was a horrible affliction, but the social consequences added crushing weight on the person and family.

We spoke last week about the Jesus' healing abilities. While he seems to have viewed his proclamation of the Gospel his primary calling, hand and hand with this was his willingness to perform healing miracles of all kinds. Indeed, his powers of healing became legendary throughout Galilee. At times Jesus expresses his frustration with this, for it seems to have the potential to thwart his main objective of preaching the good news.

The leper came to Jesus with these simple words: ***If you choose, you can make me clean.*** Mark tells us that Jesus was moved with pity. There are two possible translations of Jesus' response. The Greek word used here can mean that he was filled with compassion, which is what our translation follows. But the older manuscripts have a different Greek word, ***orgistheis***, which means anger. You would think that "pity" makes the most sense here. However, there is reason to consider "anger" as a possibility. Why you might ask?

First, a standard principle of translation says that the more difficult reading is to be preferred, because copyists are tempted to "improve" a manuscript by changing a difficult reading to an easier reading, but are not tempted to do the reverse. In this case, they would be tempted to change Jesus' anger to Jesus' compassion to make the reading easier, but would not be tempted to change compassion to anger.

Second, Matthew (8:1-4) and Luke (5:12-16), who use Mark as a source, avoid any mention of Jesus' emotion. If Mark had used the word compassion, Matthew and Luke could be expected to include that in their accounts. However, if Mark used the word anger, Matthew and Luke would be more likely to drop that from their accounts.

Whatever translation we follow here, what is beyond question is the fact that, as Mark relates it, ***Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!'***

Touching a leper was a bold, compassionate gesture. But why might Jesus have also felt some irritation? Scholars discount the possibility that he was angry with the leper for coming close because Jesus showed no reluctance to touch the man. Probably not also that he was at being interrupted, since that often happened. Some interpreters favor the idea that Mark wants us to see Jesus' anger directed against the evil forces behind leprosy.

I suggest that the possible source of anger is Jesus concern to maintain a proper balance between teaching and healing. For the most part, people were drawn to him primarily because of his healing miracles, and often failed to see the deeper spiritual dimension of this teaching. The healing of the leper, then, would be another disruption of that balance. Jesus senses that the leper is asking him to do something that will throw his ministry off-track. The leper's plea forces him to choose between mission and compassion—to compromise one or the other. This explanation also explains the strong language that Jesus uses to warn the leper not to tell anyone about his healing, other than the priest.

Just like Naaman in the Old Testament story, the leper's skin is immediately made clean. There follows Jesus' very strong words warning the leper to follow the law's requirements to see a priest and not to broadcast his healing. Mark tells us that Jesus ***strictly warned him***. The word used here describes a horse snorting. When used of people, it conveys anger, displeasure, or indignation. Mark will use this same word to describe the disciples' anger at the woman who anoints Jesus with expensive ointment (14:4-5). Mark tells us that Jesus ***immediately sent him out***. The verb is translated elsewhere as "driving out" or "casting out" demons. It conveys a good force that the translation, "sent him out," fails to convey.

But in fact, the healed leper does the opposite. He disobeys Jesus strong prohibition not to broadcast his healing. The result reminds us exactly why Jesus had warned him. Because of this healing of the leper Jesus is forced into seclusion. He can no longer openly enter the towns and villages of Galilee because of his popularity. Ironic, isn't it, the leper and Jesus have reversed positions: once socially ostracized the leper now moved around socially accepted; Jesus once free is now socially confined! Another irony, Walter Craddock observes, is that a disobedient man is among the first to preach to the good news about Jesus.

What do we learn from this story of healing? We know that there are only two occasions when a leper his healed in the Old Testament. All the law could do was stipulate regulations about cultic purity. It provided ritual purification of a leper, but was powerless to heal a person of the disease. Jesus transcends cultic and ritual regulations through the power of his healing touch. This is the surprising and awe-inspiring nature of Jesus'

power to save, both physically and spiritually. The kingdom of God had truly come near in his person.

As the body of Christ in the world what healing role can we play? In all the communities around us there are people longing for healing. They are often looking in all the wrong places to find release. It may be physical ailments that burden them, but also there may be a spiritual and emotional bankruptcy that creates an emptiness and hopelessness that nothing seems to assuage. The message of the Gospel addresses these deep and profound longings in all of us for healing, forgiveness, and a new way of looking at life. Jesus' teaching ministry was viewed by him as paramount. Physical healings were certainly a sign of God's breaking into this dimension, but it was his teaching that had the power to transform and allow us to live in hope. It was this that Jesus saw as his supreme calling. He reminds us again and again in his teaching that God's love has been shed abroad in our hearts. As we shared in our study group last Thursday, I reminded us that it is such a privilege to be a Christian. To know Christ and the power of his resurrection, to know the inheritance we have in him, is breathtaking. This is what we have to share with all those we know and come in contact with every week. This is a gift as well as a responsibility to share with all we meet.

Amen