

First United Methodist Church-Omaha
Rev. Jane Florence
February 15, 2009
Text: Mark 1:40-45
Sermon Title: "All Means All"



There is a little problem in today's scripture reading. Manuscripts and translations vary in expressing Jesus' emotion in this text. The one we read today said Jesus was filled with "pity." Older translations indicate that Jesus was filled with anger; other translations read filled with compassion. I'm not sure which it is: pity, compassion, or anger.

Skin conditions can be scary. Maybe you heard the news story this week about the high school wrestler who has staph infection. For some reason, the camera crew showed extreme up-close video of the painful, even deadly sores erupting on his skin. All those who were in a wrestling match with him are urged to see their physician immediately. Even with modern antibiotics, skin lesions can be deadly. All the more so in the first century, so extreme precautions were taken to identify and isolate anyone who might be contagious. The person with evident sores was required to wear torn clothing, leave the hair on his head uncombed and "cover his lip and cry out, 'unclean, unclean.'" The Torah law required that such a person live alone in a dwelling outside the camp/community. (Leviticus 13:45-46) Lepers had to maintain a distance of 50 paces away from any other person. If a leper touched another person or was touched by them, the other person was to be considered diseased as well and "unclean" until a priest could examine and pronounce him otherwise.

With these severe restrictions, the afflicted person was unable to work--anything they touched became unclean as well; therefore, they were reduced to begging for survival. Lepers were isolated and ostracized, diseased medically, outcast socially, ostracized spiritually, and deprived financially.

This text says that the leper came on his knees begging to Jesus. This man violated the fifty-pace boundary and instead of shouting "unclean – stay away." He called out to Jesus for mercy. This man who knows no human contact, felt no human touch, no hug, no embrace--calls out for mercy.

Jesus violates all social and religious and legal barriers and "stretched out his hand and touched him." It's easy to see how the text could say "moved with pity" or "moved with compassion," either interpretation seems appropriate. But, why would the older (usually considered the most accurate) text say, "moved with anger?" Is Jesus angry at

the leper who crossed the line and contaminated him? No, I think not--if so, he would not have reached out to him. Jesus may well have been angry at this disease which caused the man such pain.

We get angry when disease torments our loved ones. A long-time friend of mine watched her young son slowly die of cancer. First it took his leg then it marched up his spine. We were all very angry at the disease which ravaged his small body so viciously and robbed him of childhood pleasures and robbed his mother of her son. We know anger in the face of pain and illness.

However, I think Jesus' anger was at more than the disease itself. The man called out to Jesus, "You can make me clean!" The religious establishment deemed his disease "unclean." The priests ostracized him from the community. The man doesn't ask that his skin be made smooth; he asks to be made clean--to be readmitted to the community. Jesus could well have been angry at the system which inflicted more pain than even the disease. Jesus could well have been angry at the religious system which harmed this man's soul in the name of God.

Moved with compassion, pity and anger, Jesus heals the man and says, "Don't tell anyone. Go show the priests." But the man didn't obey Jesus. How could he? He couldn't contain his jubilation. He told everyone he saw—he ran out and gave his loved ones big hugs--he shouted for all to see.

There were consequences. The text says, because the word spread, "Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from everywhere."

The leper was once banned from the city--trapped by his disease and the system is now free to go anywhere he wants, but Jesus, the liberator, is now forced to stay out. Jesus healed the isolated man and in doing so exchanged places with him.

When Jesus came face to face with evidence of human evil in this world, he was angry at how the outcasts were treated. He was filled with righteous indignation and filled with compassion. He reached out, across the taboo lines. He got involved. He touched the unclean. He welcomed those who were excluded. He challenged the political, social and religious systems. He loved all, and it cost him dearly.

I drove up to the monthly city council meeting to offer the invocation in the small community where I was first pastor. Except, instead of the usual dozen cars out front,

the street was full and people were spilling out the front doors. When I managed to get inside, I learned that news had spread through the small town that a developer was considering building a housing project for low income elderly--and the land was located adjacent to one of the nicer subdivisions. The residents were there in full force with anxiety about their property values. Before the developer could begin his presentation, one councilman made a speech. He talked about the plight of the elderly in America. He told a story about his own grandmother and the difficulty she faced in paying for medications and paying her housing. He painted a picture of the desperate needs being ignored. Then he said, "I know someone should do something about this problem--in theory." He went on to assure his neighbors and his constituents that they wouldn't be bringing in those people to their neighborhood. They could rest assured their property values would be safe; it wasn't going to cost them.

I was angry. This man clearly knew the right thing, but he sold out the truth for a vote in the next election. I sat there with my own heart pounding and disgust growing within me. The developer didn't even make his presentation. The council voted not to hear it. The request was denied. The moment passed. Everyone cheered and went home feeling good.

But me. I was ashamed of the city council and angry at the speaker and my neighbors to silence the proposal out of fear before they ever learned the facts. I continued to stew about it into the night, and then I realized what was bothering me the most. I was most ashamed and disgusted--with me. I sat in that meeting, and I didn't say a word. I kept my mouth shut out of shyness or out of fear. It was a small town; some of those angry people were my church members; others were my neighbors--prospective church members. It would have been uncomfortable, and it would have cost me to speak out. But, I learned that night it was uncomfortable and costly when I didn't speak out too.

There are many who need us to reach out to them. There are many who need advocates: the elderly in poverty, children being abused and neglected, immigrants denied mercy and justice, prisoners murdered by the state.

At St. George Methodist Church in Philadelphia, white ushers pulled black worshippers off their knees while praying. 222 years ago blacks were not permitted to pray alongside whites in that church. 90 years ago women did not have the right to vote in this country. 54 years ago women were not allowed to be ordained in the Methodist Church. 45 years ago many blacks still did not know the reality of voting in this country. 43 years ago interracial marriage was illegal in every state in this country. 34 years ago

marital rape was legal in the US. 1 year ago there had never been a person of color in the US presidency.

Those things have changed. It's hard for us to imagine that blacks and women were once legally considered less than full persons just because of how they were created. Gender and racial discrimination still exists within individual hearts and minds, but legal barriers have slowly been dismantled. Culture changes slowly; laws change slowly, but with the efforts of brave men and women speaking out progress is made; justice is woven into the pages of history. There are many who are marginalized, silenced, and ostracized today, but perhaps none so much as the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities.

There are well over 1,000 federal rights and benefits which heterosexuals are entitled to when married such as inheritance rights, power of attorney in medical decisions, Social Security benefits for a surviving spouse, joint tax filing, the right to make funeral arrangements. These rights and benefits have been and continue to be systematically denied to gay and lesbian people. When will we look back and wonder why these people were ever denied fair treatment just because of how they were created and their love for one another?

The church has always been on the forefront of breaking down barriers. Now that's not entirely true. To say "the church" is rather broad. There were church people who were pro-slavery; and those who were against it. There were church people in favor of women's rights; and those against them. So, let me restate that claim. There have always been those from within the Judeo-Christian church who have been at the forefront working for peace and justice. Those at the forefront of dismantling discrimination have often come from within the church.

Back in 1982 a group of concerned Methodists began working to develop a program in which local churches would declare their support for the concerns of lesbians and gays. The Reconciling Ministry Network is made up of individuals (such as yourselves), communities and congregations who speak out to enable full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life of the United Methodist Church, both in policy and practice. Almost 10 years ago, this congregation became the first (and still the only) Nebraska Methodist congregation to join RMN. This congregation took a stand on behalf of God's love for all. We believe that God loves All, God welcomes All; and All means ALL. That stance was not without cost; those who disagreed left. Friendships were lost; church finances were strained. There is always a

cost when walls of discrimination are challenged. It is painful to tear down old messages which keep people apart.

Some of us learned from our family, or our community, or a church that we are not acceptable for one reason or another. Some of us learned that we are not acceptable to God because of our gender, or race, or a behavior we did or didn't do, or a belief we did or did not accept. Some of us learned as children that we weren't smart enough, or tall enough, or pretty enough, or athletic enough to be valuable. Most of us have learned that a part of us--some part--must stay outcast; hidden away from those that would find us unclean, unworthy, unlovable.

It is to that part--that hidden part--that part of us that we are ashamed of, or embarrassed by, or frightened by--it is to that part of us that we hold back--which keeps us from being fully present--it is to that part in each of us that the light of God--the hand of Christ stretches out to touch, to honor, to love.

No one stands outside God's loving embrace, so we reach out that all may know: all means all: all are of sacred worth in the love of God. Thanks be to God.