

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." 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.

"I Do Choose. Be Made Clean!"

I grew up in the days before sleek TV ad campaigns such as Nike's "Just Do It" began. I was a child in the '80s, an era of snappy TV jingles that are regrettably stuck in my long-term memory. Ads such as "Aren't you glad--you used dial?" "Gentlemen prefer Hanes" and "Just for the taste of it, Diet Coke". I remember Juicy Fruit's "The taste is gonna move you" and that "Kleenex says 'Bless you.'" No one my age can forget the commercial that made a legend out of a small child, "Hey Mikey...He likes it!" All these ad campaigns came flooding back into my memory this past week because of one annoying jingle that kept singing in my psyche as I was meditating on our scripture passage from Mark. I was pondering the significance of Jesus' physical action as he "stretched out his hand and touched" the leper and into my head shot AT&T's, "Reach out, reach out and touch someone." And it wouldn't leave all week.

Well Jesus reached out and touched someone in Mark, but he reached out to someone off limits. He touched a man who was ritually unclean. That leper was an outcast, an untouchable person for a righteous Jew of Jesus' day. Yet moved with pity Jesus reached out and touched the leper. Then he said, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Something important is going on even before the leper is healed. Jesus went crashing through a major religious barrier. He could have healed the man's wound and then touched him after he was ritually clean. Instead he chose to touch the unclean man, defiling himself in the eyes of his contemporaries. Then he made the man clean. This is not just another healing story; God is on the loose in Jesus breaking down all religious barriers that oppress and ostracize people.

For us to understand the significance of these actions we need some kind of modern day example of how wide the divide between the ritually pure and the unclean had become in ancient Judaism and how lepers were treated in those years. In India today an "untouchable" or *dalit*, which in Sanskrit means "trampled upon," still suffers a similar social plight to the leper in Mark. The *dalit* are born unclean according to the Hindi caste system. Like the leper they face societal estrangement and exclusion from the larger community. Although India's constitution banned untouchability in 1950, discrimination against them is still pervasive. A human rights watch activist said that even today, "*Dalits* are not allowed to drink from the same wells, attend the same temples, wear shoes in the presence of an upper caste, or drink from the same cups in tea stalls." India's Untouchables are relegated to the lowest jobs, and live in constant fear of being publicly humiliated and disgraced.¹ Amazingly, both the leper and many *dalits*

have asked for justice and their space back in their communities. The leper came to Jesus believing, "If you choose, you can make me clean." He asked for and demanded to be let back into the community. Many of the 260 million Hindi, Buddhist, Sikh and Christian *dalits* are working for the day when their society will recognize their inherent worthiness.

This notion of a pure people being tainted by interaction with others plays out in almost every society. This notion, that some are within some boundary while others are outside remains an unfortunate part of our society and even the church today. As individuals we mask our self-insecurities through shades of this belief. This notion of God-given superiority or purity is pushed to its extreme when used by groups as propaganda to incite war, hate and dominance such as the Holocaust, ethnic cleansings and white supremacy hate crimes. Our scripture passages show God tearing down boundaries and barriers, providing compassion to those whom society would dare to call outsiders. "I do choose," said Jesus. It's the gospel story! Who is an outsider if we all stand in need of God's cleansing for our transgressions? Who is "other" if God created the cosmos out of self-giving love and declared it good?

One of my New Testament professors, Dr. Brian Blount, said about Jesus' challenge to the scribes' interpretation of the holiness and purity laws. "In a perilous act of solidarity, instead of confirming the man's exclusion by shunning him Jesus reached out and symbolically drew him in. He shattered the boundaries of purity that displaced the infirm and in the process rewrote the book on the nature of God's community."² God entered the unclean, humanity, to be hope for all. "I do choose. Be made clean!" The nature of God's community is to be one of welcome and risk taking, as we all understand ourselves as outsiders brought into reconciliation with God receiving healing and hope through God's amazing grace.

Of the 24 million Christians in India, two-thirds are *dalits*.³ Thousands more of the 260 million *dalits* have become Christians each year. They clearly hear grace offered to them in the message of God who enters human suffering and is not afraid to defy societal codes and restrictions. The message has reached them. They are not what the system tells them, they are beloved by God who stands with them in their fight for justice and makes them whole even before justice comes.

For those of us who society generally accepts, I wonder what it takes for us to declare ourselves, as the leper did, in need? It is harder for many of us who are delusional in our beliefs of self-sufficiency to open ourselves to receive grace. Yet we are in need of cleansing for our wounds. We stand in need of cleansing for our sin against God and one another too. Like the title of the Henri Nouwen book that seeks a ministry that emulates Jesus' life, Christians are to understand that we are "wounded healers" who go out to share with others from a place of vulnerability. We are receivers of grace who are transformed throughout the journey of our faith.

A few weeks ago I read a meditation written by a senior minister of a large congregation in an urban area. He had signed onto a project to spend a few days and nights on the street as the homeless do in his city's downtown. The intention of the project was to help those providing social services understand more of what the homeless experience physically and emotionally on a daily basis. He hit the street looking and smelling his part in some sweaty, dirty clothes he had prepared. He was unshaven and scruffy. Everyone walked around and away from him. He was prepared to eat less, to skip his daily shower, and to be dependent on someone else's mercy for food and shelter.

But he was not emotionally prepared to handle the pain of isolation, the loss of friendly smiles and of conversation. For the first time in his life he was not “socially acceptable” to people he met on the street. He yearned for someone to be open to real engagement with him.

After a night in a downtown shelter and a lot of walking and moving around to avoid the police, he entered a Catholic church and slipped into a back pew for a service. Afterwards the priest came down the aisle, sat down and talked with him. Then the priest reached out and took his hand in his and prayed for him. It was the first and only intentional touch he received during his days on the street. It was enough. The barrier that had held back his brokenness from God broke. Again he knew himself to be whole, made clean, loved and cherished by God and he realized he had been running on his own self-sufficiency for a long while now. In the priest’s ministry of engagement he saw a new model for his ministry. He was no longer afraid to reach out and touch anyone with a word of grace and love. His newfound vulnerability was used by God to help others as he opened himself to the risky business of ministry.

“If you choose, you can make me clean” said the leper to Jesus. What guts the leper had to ask to be made clean. He asked for boundaries to be broken because he believed that in Jesus, God could return him to his community. He would not return the same though! Now he “began to proclaim” what God had done for him “freely.” He spread the word and others began to look for this Jesus who breaks boundaries and restores people to wholeness.

Here, at the end of the first chapter of Mark we hear Jesus’ words and are told that God chose to be vulnerable, coming to us in Jesus, in order that we may be set free from whatever is binding us. Now is the time for our ministry to follow the ministry of our savior. Do not be afraid to reach out and touch someone showing forth your hope in God who breaks down all barriers for the sake of the world. Amen.

¹ “India's "Untouchables" Face Violence, Discrimination” Hillary Mayell in *National Geographic News*, June 2, 2003, at http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/06/0602_030602_untouchables.html

² Brian K. Blount and Gary W. Charles in *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2002) 26.

³ ‘A ray of hope’ *Court decision in India favors Christian ‘untouchables’* by Anto Akkara. Ecumenical News International, April 15, 2005, <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/2005/05208.htm>