

HEALED, RESTORED, REJOICING!

It is quite amazing, is it not, how easily we take everyday “wonders” for granted and seem quite surprised when those “wonders” do not work as we expect them to.

A most mundane example would be our automobiles. We simply expect them to work and hardly ever stop in astonishment at how many tiny little pieces of that machinery (not to mention the larger and more noticeable parts of our car) work together so well most of the time. We just take them for granted – and we get very disturbed when they do not work as we expect them to. The car works so well most of the time that we expect it to work well **all** the time and get upset when it does not do so.

In the same way, we take our bodies pretty much for granted. Rarely do we stop to think of how many, many things must work together peacefully and efficiently at any given time to even keep them going, much less to make them feel well. Millions of interactions must take place every second to sustain our bodily processes and to make it possible for us to function without difficulty. When suddenly we have an ache or pain or when some major failure in an organ or limb occurs we immediately wonder why this had to happen to us as though malfunctions should never occur. It is not as though we have been cognizant of all the times things have worked so properly, of course. It is rather that we only think about them when they have given way and we are in discomfort, pain, feel threatened, or perhaps even face death (which, of course, must be expected by everyone else save for us, you know!).

Can you not imagine that such was the case with the man who approached Jesus in our text? He was not **born** with the skin disease called leprosy. It had been contracted in some way long after he was born. He remembered another day when he had been well, though, when he had gone about his business, had enjoyed his family, had been a respected member of a community of people. As today’s Psalm puts it, “I said in my prosperity, ‘I shall never be moved.’ By your favor, O Lord, you made my mountain stand strong; **you hid your face; I was dismayed.**”

Do we not all recognize the plight of this man? Have we not all had those moments when we wonder why God “hid his face” and left us in shoes similar to this man afflicted by leprosy – when we were in poor health or perhaps with unexpected financial issues or maybe with family distress or possibly in deep depression over this or that problem that seemed insurmountable?

Let’s unpack this story a bit. We don’t know anything about this man’s previous life. We only see him in the present. How often that’s the case! We see someone homeless and we may speculate how they got there, but we don’t know. More than once, I have been shocked to hear a story of someone who had “what appeared to be a normal, sheltered, productive life” and something happened to spiral that life out of control.

Such was the story of a woman named Dorothy whom I worked with in Danbury, Connecticut. Dorothy was a woman in her seventies or eighties who was living on the

street and was a very difficult problem for two of the local shelters. When I tried to find out about family, I discovered she had a daughter who had tried to get Dorothy to live with her but she refused. I then listened to her story and found that Dorothy had had a stable family life, raised her children, but at some point had a mental breakdown and life spiraled out of control.

Or, another example: I've visited with persons in nursing homes and haven't known the stories of their younger days. I only have seen them in the present.

Surely much of the misery of this man was the fact that he remembered better days here in this lonely place from which he emerges to plead for the help of Jesus. His diseased condition had, by the laws of that day's culture, isolated him from every human contact except, perhaps, the company of other lepers in the same condition as that in which he now found himself. We are not told of any companionship whatever here, however. He was alone out in this desolate quarantined isolation lest he contaminate others in the community.

How he had heard of Jesus or knew anything about him in this terrible isolation is not known, but this we are told: he "came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, 'If you will, you can make me clean.'" He didn't question the **power** of Jesus to do this for him. He only questioned the **will** of Jesus over against his request. He casts himself entirely onto the will of the only one who could help him.

The Healing Word is Spoken

Jesus immediately assures him of his will to heal: "I do so chose; be clean!" But between the man's request and Jesus' response lies a world of significance in the way Mark tells the story.

Our translation says, "Jesus was "moved with pity," That phrase strikes a warm place in our heart, does it not? But the peculiar thing is that, while most translations fall back on this phrase, some ancient manuscripts read, "being angry, he stretched out his hand . . . !" There are great debates about these two words. What place does anger have in this tender story of Jesus' care for a needy man? The question has been asked many times over with no definitive answer.

Hubert Beck responds this way: "Is it not possible that the anger spoken of is not directed against the man who asked for relief, but at the leprous disease that had so debilitated him? Is it possible that, according to these older manuscripts, Jesus is expressing his anger that sin has so disturbed the world in which humankind exists that it has brought this man into such a desperate situation. It could be an expression of "pity" for the man because Jesus is so "angry" with the very disturbance that is crippling him?"

Possibly, then, we here get an insight into the mission of Jesus – a mission to disarm the very powers of that which cripples the world that was made to serve God. Is not the cross itself, in a sense, God's expression of anger and hatred over against sin and death in a

powerfully vivid fashion? There God clashes with the bitter enemy in a mortal battle to wrestle the world free from death and all that it brings with it . . . including the diseased condition that haunts this leprous man kneeling before Jesus who will be the crucified One bearing all that troubles the world on his shoulders.

Whether this understanding was originally built into this text or not, the fact remains that Jesus' response to the man is indeed filled with pity or the word that speaks more powerfully to me is compassion. Jesus responded: "I will; be clean."

JESUS TOUCHED HIM

The second thing that is of great significance between the man's request and Jesus' response is the note that "he stretched out his hand and touched him" as he spoke to him. Although we may shrink back from doing something like that because of the horrible sight and even smell of one afflicted by a severe skin disease (the word "leprosy" was apparently used rather loosely in New Testament times to indicate any of a number of severe skin diseases), the point is not simply that Jesus was brave enough to get beyond his senses to touch the man. By the religious laws of the time this touch made Jesus unclean himself – immediately, simply by the touch. In other words, to touch this man was to put himself into the same category with the leprous man and therefore to make it mandatory for Jesus to go to the priest along with the healed man to get a certificate of cleanliness when the diseased man was restored to health. The touch made Jesus a fellow leper . . . a position that no person witnessing this moment would want to occupy.

Now, bringing us up to the present, it is clear that HIV/AIDS can't be contracted by hugging someone - but we still treat those suffering as if they are lepers. With Leprosy, modern Hansen's Disease, before there was knowledge that it was not contractable by touch, they would separate everyone from the mainstream population. Last year the book group read a novel called "The Island" about such a colony off the island of Cypress. Remember similar proposals to take all the AIDS sufferers and isolate them on a island? How isolated they were in hospitals in the 80's and early 90's and still today in many parts of the world? Quarantined from others. How they longed not only for health, but to be restored to community!

Remember the pictures of Princess Diana, hugging people with AIDS, with sick and dying children on her lap? When commenting about Diana, Nelson Mandela said:

"When she stroked the limbs of someone with leprosy, or sat on the bed of a man with HIV/AIDS and held his hand, she transformed public attitudes and improved the life chances of such people, people felt if a British princess can go to a ward with HIV patients, then there's nothing to be superstitious about."

In Cartagena, Columbia is the Cathedral of Saint Peter Claver, a Jesuit known as the Patron Saint of the slaves. He was canonised in 1888.

Cartagena was a chief centre for the slave trade in the Americas for over 100 years. Ten thousand slaves poured into the port each year after crossing the Atlantic from West Africa under conditions so foul and inhuman that an estimated one-third of the passengers died in transit.

“As soon as a slave ship entered the port, Peter Claver moved into its infested hold to minister to the ill-treated and miserable passengers. After the slaves were herded out of the ship like chained animals and shut up in nearby yards to be gazed at by the crowds, Claver plunged in among them with medicines, food, bread, brandy, lemons and tobacco. With the help of interpreters he gave basic instructions and assured his brothers and sisters of their human dignity and God's saving love...Claver understood that concrete service like the distributing of medicine, food or brandy to his black brothers and sisters could be as effective a communication of the word of God as mere verbal preaching. As Peter Claver often said, "We must speak to them with our hands before we try to speak to them with our lips."

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What does it mean, in this day and age, to be “clean”? Is cleanliness next to godliness? If we shower every day and make sure we don't have a bad odour, no pimples or acne, no chapped skin - are we godly people? Is that all it takes? Or, is it that being loving and generous people (godly people) makes us clean inside? Is outer cleanliness any indication of what kind of people we are?

JESUS TAKING ON AUDACIOUS AUTHORITY

Now a third thing becomes quite evident in the story. First of all Jesus' response is not what those around may have expected. Had Jesus said, “It is God's will for you to be clean” or even “I call on the Father to cleanse you,” it would have been acceptable. But Jesus' response takes all the responsibility for the healing on himself: “**I DO CHOSE**; be clean.” There were healers of all sorts – religious ones as well as physicians of a sort or frauds and pretend healers – who populated the landscape of the time. But here was one who took personal responsibility for healing this man –

And Jesus did it by simply **touching** him, taking his disease up into himself, becoming labeled diseased with the man! He did not go to the priest for a bill of cleansing as he instructed the healed man to do, for he did not consider himself diseased for having touched the man. **Quite the reverse!** He considered the man cleansed because he, who had taken up the leprosy into himself had not only absorbed it, but had handed his own health back to the man whom he touched!

Again, Hubert Beck conjectures, “And again must we not wonder whether Mark is telling the story in such a fashion that he is giving us a “foretaste” of that which is to come. Is this not ultimately the story of the cross? The cross is where the “healer” touches the “sickness of the world”!. In and through the cross God touches the sin-sick world through

Jesus in order to heal it from that which would otherwise drag it down into the cold grave of death!”

DON'T TELL ANYONE!

So Jesus has healed our friend, the unnamed leper and now gives him clear direction about what's next.

In order to continue his march from this healing of the leper to the healing of Calvary Jesus wants to go about the countryside freely, so he “sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and said to him, *‘See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.’* This is a strange warning, however, no matter how one takes it. We are not told whether the man ever got to the priest to receive his certificate of healing, presenting at the same time the appropriate offerings of thanksgiving for his cleansing according to the Law of Moses. What we are told is this: “he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news.” We can surely understand how hard it would have been to restrain his tongue, can we not? To return to the thoughts with which we began, marvels and wonders like the health of our body are easily taken for granted until they are no longer available, and once they are taken away we greatly lament their loss. But when they are returned to us again, we come to such an appreciation that we must tell everyone of the miraculous restoration of health and well-being that has come to us. To keep quiet now is the most difficult thing imaginable.

The reason for asking him to keep quiet about this becomes immediately apparent, however. “Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.” What seemed so important to the man healed became the problem for the Healer! The man's exuberant testimony created a difficult situation for Jesus.

Of course, even if he had not said a word, was not his very re-appearance in the company of those among whom he had enjoyed life earlier not itself been such a testimony? How could he hide the marvel of this healing, even had he wanted to, when he returned to the life from which he had been exiled at an earlier time? Those who now saw him whole and well would have, themselves, been witnesses to the Healer even apart from the man's words of rejoicing as he testified to all concerning his restoration!

So the story begins: The Leper is healed, restored, and goes out rejoicing. Jesus begins the journey to the cross, as he becomes the leper, or the widow, or the outcast, reaching out with compassion to each of us who needs his healing touch.