

I believe we come to worship on Sunday because we want to be close to God. During the week, we get caught up in work, schedule, meetings and well, the things of the Spirit seem distant to us. So, on Sunday, even braving the marathon runners, we get up, get dressed and come to worship. We want to be in God's presence.

Our text in Mark for today is a strange, even disturbing story of a person wanting to be in the presence of God. The leper recognizes Jesus as one whose power conforms to the will of God. He comes up to Jesus and instead of requesting that Jesus heal him, he makes a statement about Jesus' ability to heal. "If you choose, you can make me clean." Strange statement – making one who was unclean to be clean is a power that belongs only to God.

Leprosy. It relates to a number of skin diseases. A person with leprosy may contaminate others with ritual impurity. So a person had to show themselves to the priest. The priest would follow the rules laid out in Leviticus 13 and 14. If a person's skin disease could be healed, the priest would put the person through a ritual of purification. If a person had leprosy, they were cut off from family, community, any social structure that could provide care and help. They were banned to the edge of the community. They had to dress in torn clothing and warn others not to come too close. What the lepers needed most – the care and support of community – was taken from them. When they need the human contact of a hug, a hand to hold, a pat on the back – they were forced to withdraw from family and community.

"Moved with pity, Jesus stretches out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean."

"Moved with pity" can also be translated "Moved with compassion." In some manuscripts the Greek words there are also translated, "Becoming angry." "Becoming angry, Jesus stretches out his hand and touched him and said to him, 'I do choose, be make clean.'" In response to the man approaching and wanting help, Jesus is filled with anger. I think Jesus is angry because of what society had done to this man and others like him. Some people thought that leprosy was a divine curse. Maybe Jesus is troubled by the view that would make God responsible for the man's condition. I know it made me angry for people to put AIDS in the category of a "Curse of God." That view makes God and the diseased person responsible for their illness.

Jesus' behavior of reaching out to touch the man violates the restraints imposed by those concerned with ritual purity. I think that ordinary trade people, laborers – like Jesus and his disciples – probably did not share the concern for ritual purity as did the priests and scribes. Jesus orders the man to respect the law. Jesus can heal him, but he cannot rejoin the larger community without the certification of the priests.

Jesus heals the man. He sternly warns the man no to say anything to anyone. The man promptly ignores him and begins to tell everyone. Jesus is so popular that he has to go out into the country.

I want to look at two ways this text can speak to us today.

One, Jesus reaches out and touches the leper. Jesus had the power of healing in his hand. I would say that we do also. We just don't know what is in our hand. Remember Moses. We all know the story of his mother devising a plan to keep him alive by placing him in a basket in the river where the daughter of Pharaoh would find him. Moses is in Median, tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro. Jethro is the priest of Median. God speaks to Moses out of a burning bush and tells Moses

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PILGRIM C H U R C H

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that he has seen the misery of the Hebrews in Egypt. God has heard them crying out because of the slave drivers. God knows their suffering. God tells Moses that he is going to Egypt to bring the Hebrews out of slavery. Moses has lots of doubts about that. "I am a wanted man in Egypt. I can't talk, you need to send Aaron. God, I don't even know your name." Moses is not happy about this project. God says, "What is that in your hand?" Moses answers, "A staff." "Throw it on the ground." It becomes a snake and when he picks it up again it becomes a staff. (I think that is where God would have lost me. I have seen the people in Straight Creek Church of God pick up a snake. I don't think that will happen to me.) God sends Moses to bring the captives from Egypt.

What is in your hand? Well, it is just a ballot. Really? That ballot can bring hope. It can bring people who are descendants of slaves to believe that they can reach the highest office in our land. It can cause us to close down a prison in Guantanamo. It can cause us to get our troops out of Iraq. It can put health care in the reach of four million children. What is in your hand? Well, is it just a ballot?

What is in your hand? Well, it is just a piece of chalk. Really? I have seen a teacher use that chalk to teach math, English and literature.

What is in your hand? Well it is just a piece of paper wanting me to be a committee chairperson. It is the work of a child wanting approval. It is a check book. It is a set of keys. What is in our hands that we can use for healing and inclusion in our church and society?

Two – what about this statement to be silent – for the leper to tell no one? I have to admit that I know that part of the role of a minister is to speak with clarity about the scripture. I confess, I have no idea what this about. I think if I had been in the leper's position, I would have acted as he did.

I was in the Northern Province in South Africa with Peace Corps volunteer Kim Perez. We went to a village, Phokoane to an AIDS Prayer Day sponsored by the Northern Province Department of Health. Lots of entertainment and 13 speeches, (12 of them by women). We lit candles for those who had died with AIDS, offered prayers and did some singing. One of the speakers was a teenager from a village who talked openly about having AIDS. That in itself was remarkable as she might be chased out of her village when she gets home. The women were handing out scarves. When they were folded and placed on their heads, you could read the words, "Break the silence. Speak up about AIDS." The courage of the women at that rally made a lasting impression on me about speaking out against injustice.

There are those in our society who are like the man with leprosy. They are pushed to the fringe of society because of their color, their sexual orientation. They are poor, they are old, they are children. They are released from prison. They are saying to the church "If you choose, you can stretch forth your hand and your voice and make a difference in our lives." We come to church to be in the presence of God. I believe we are also in the presence of God when we are with those who need our hand and our voice.

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