

THE HEALING OF A MAN BY JESUS  
 (or, “What Would YOU Do If Jesus  
 Came into YOUR Life?”)  
 Mark 1:40-45 (NRSV)  
 February 15, 2009 – Ordinary 6  
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA – Rock Hill, SC  
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**Mark 1:40-45 (NRSV)**

- 40 *A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling, he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.”*
- 41 *Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!”*
- 42 *Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.*
- 43 *After sternly warning him, he sent him away at once,*
- 44 *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.”*
- 45 *But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and 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 have told you on other occasions that one of my heroes in the faith is the Presbyterian minister/writer Frederick Buechner. For me, one of his best books is entitled Telling Secrets in which he writes:

I have called this book Telling Secrets because I have come to believe that by and large the human family all has the same secrets, which are both very telling and very important to tell.

[Buechner, Frederick, Telling Secrets, San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991, p. 2]

Buechner says that we should tell our secrets because:

- (1) we hunger to be known in our full humanness;
- (2) it makes it easier to see where we have been and where we are going;
- (3) by entering the deep places inside us where our secrets are kept, we come closer to God than any other place.

Have you ever thought about telling your secrets to a loved one... or to a therapist?

The passage of scripture which we have before us this morning drew me to Frederick Buechner’s book Telling Secrets because one of his secrets was that he had a much beloved daughter who was in need of healing. Do you know someone who is in need of healing?

**ANOREXIA NERVOSA** is just one of the “eating disorders” which is plaguing our society as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century. ANOREXIA NERVOSA is “**the relentless pursuit of thinness.**” This disease is characterized by a fear of gaining weight and becoming fat and the person may become depressed and irritable, sometimes withdrawing from society. Sometimes the person becomes dependent upon her parents and may fear assuming adult responsibilities. ANOREXIA NERVOSA was the disease which was destroying the daughter of Frederick Buechner.

Words such as “Anorexia Nervosa” and “cancer” and “AIDS” strike fear to our hearts, mainly because in the past we have known so little about these diseases, but they are becoming words which are less fearful as research and study reveal more about them.

Now, if you and I have some “gut” feelings for words such as “Anorexia Nervosa” and “cancer” and “AIDS” then we have an idea of what people in Jesus’ day must have felt when they heard the dreaded word, “**leprosy.**” It was a terrifying disease! So serious was the disease that there are several chapters in the Old Testament book of Leviticus that deal with it. In studying for this sermon, I used a Jewish translation of the Torah which was published by the Jewish Publication Society of America (Philadelphia, 1962) and which carried this footnote for Leviticus 13:3:

“The Hebrew word “sara’ath” is used for a variety of diseases. Where a human being is declared unclean by reason of “sara’ath,” the traditional translation “leprosy” has been retained without regard to modern medical terminology.”

You and I must always remember that the Bible is not a 21<sup>st</sup> century medical textbook. And so we are never really very sure about the diseases in either the Old Testament days or in the New Testament times, even those reported by the physician, gospel-writer Luke! You and I probably never give it a thought that people in Jesus’ time had never heard the word “**GERM**” and if they had heard it, they would not have known what it meant!

Now, of course, I have no earthly idea whether or not Jesus had any concept of a germ or virus and what they can do to us physically. But I have a suspicion that he did, because the Old Testament book of Leviticus, written 500 to 1000 years before Jesus and reflecting oral tradition of even centuries earlier, tells that when it is decided that a person has leprosy, he is to cover his upper lip and mouth with a cloth (cf. Leviticus 13:45) which sounds suspiciously like a surgical mask!

At any rate, like Anorexia Nervosa and cancer and AIDS, the disease of leprosy was feared and dreaded in the time of Jesus. And that is what today’s passage is all about.

William Barclay, the New Testament commentator, tells us that there were mainly **three diseases** in Jesus’ day that were referred to as leprosy.

THE FIRST KIND Barclay refers to as **nodular leprosy**. It is characterized by small nodules that appear on the skin, growing much larger and finally becoming large ulcers. These ulcerated sores spread over the entire body.

THE SECOND KIND of leprosy Dr. Barclay refers to as **anesthetic leprosy** because the nerve endings lose all sensations in the area of the body that is affected. Muscles waste away and ulcerations occur over the body. Many times some of the body extremities such as fingers and toes may drop off.

THE THIRD KIND of leprosy Dr. Barclay refers to as **leprosy proper**. It is a combination of the first two kinds, and it is the most common of all.

Now, evidently skin diseases were so contagious and so misunderstood and so feared throughout early Biblical history that the TORAH was very specific about what should be done in the case of leprosy. Listen as I read to you from the book of Leviticus:

*As for the person with a leprous affection, his clothes shall be rent, his hair shall be left disheveled, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.*  
(Leviticus 13:45-46; The Torah, Ibid)

Today our medical sciences know a great deal more about leprosy than they did 2000 years ago. But it is my guess that unless you and I work constantly in the infectious disease isolation unit of a hospital, you and I will never understand the fear of "catching" the disease of leprosy that the early world must have felt. If someone was "unclean," you were not to touch him or even be around him! What a terribly frightening sound must have been the leper's voice crying out: "Unclean! Unclean!" And it must have been even more frightening to the leper!

And then, here comes Jesus onto the scene!. And what does he do?

**He not only talks to the leper but he actually touches him!**

Now, this is difficult for us to understand in the same way that first century people would understand. **It was so shocking!**

Suppose I were to publicly welcome with a physical hug and kiss a man like Osama bin Laden.

Suppose I were to pay a pastoral visit on a woman who was known as the town's prostitute.

It is very difficult for me to think of a good 21<sup>st</sup> century example of an action today that would equal the 1<sup>st</sup> century example of Jesus touching a leper. **It was so shocking!**

And yet, in response to the leper's plea, **"If you choose, you can make me clean,"** is not this 41<sup>st</sup> verse in Mark's first chapter one of the most beautiful verses in the Bible?

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

Oh, my friends, what a tremendous picture of God at work in the world! If you have ever wanted a picture that you could frame and put up on the wall to show people what God looks like, this is the picture!

We can put it on the walls of our lives along with the picture which shows the Father with outstretched arms welcoming home his prodigal son!

We can put it beside the picture of Jesus stooping down to the sand to write with his finger while lying on the ground in front of him is the woman caught in adultery and all around them are the self-righteous ones who are pointing their fingers at her, holding stoning-rocks in their hands!

WHAT A BEAUTIFUL PICTURE OF GOD-IN-THE-FLESH:

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

In Telling Secrets, Frederick Buechner describes how his experience with his daughter and her battle with Anorexia Nervosa was enriched by a support group. He relates that some groups are composed of alcoholics and some, like the ones he discovered, were composed of people who have no alcoholic problem themselves but come from families who do. And the one thing that they have in common is that they all believe that they cannot live fully human lives without each other and without what they call their Higher Power.

Buechner was surprised to discover that each meeting began with a prayer which had been written by one of his old professors at Union Theological Seminary, Reinhold

Niebuhr:

*God, grant me the serenity to  
accept the things I cannot change,  
the courage to change the things I can, and  
the wisdom to know the difference."*

(Ibid, p. 91)

Now, I must confess that I am about to do something that a good preacher is not supposed to do. And it is this. I am going to read something into the passage that we have before us. What I am about to do is referred to in Biblical homiletical terms with the word "eisegesis" which means "read into." A good preacher is supposed to be concerned with "exegesis" which means to "draw out" the meaning of the passage, or to

“*expose*” the passage. That is why, in our order of service every Sunday I list what is usually referred to as the sermon as “The Exposition of Scripture.”

Let me be clear. I do not want to belittle the miracle of the physical healing that occurs in the story. **I accept the story on face value.** Jesus made the man healthy and whole. **I believe it.** And I believe God uses people such as you and I to be agents of healing in our world today. Have you ever given that much thought?

Now I would be interested in knowing what YOU think, but I believe the place that the story comes the closest to me as a person here in Rock Hill in 2009 is when I make the transition of the disease of the man to the sin of the man. That is NOT the way that it is written, but it is the way that I can deal with it helpfully for my own situation. And I am **NOT** saying that “sin” causes illness (although sometimes that is true).

**In all of my uncleanness and my sinfulness, God in Jesus Christ comes to me and makes me whole.** Jesus returns me to the original condition in which God intended me when God made me. God forgives me of my sins and makes me a new person. ***I am a new creation.*** (And I have to keep reminding myself of this, hour by hour, day by day, for I find that I too easily fall back into my own selfishness and self-righteousness!)

The Apostle Paul put it this way:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation;  
the old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

(1st Corinthians 5:17)

While I do not know it for sure, my suspicion is that you are as I am, in that you probably carry with you various burdens that are symptoms of your own selfishness and sinfulness.

Perhaps it is an attitude.

Perhaps it is an act.

Perhaps it is something from years in the past.

Perhaps it is as fresh as this very moment.

Perhaps it involves something that you should have done.

Perhaps it is something that you have left undone.

Perhaps it is just the feeling that you are “unclean.”

Whatever form our sinfulness takes for each of us, there is **healing** in today’s story in the gospel of Mark for us.

**God in Jesus Christ reaches out his hand to us, and touches us, and says:**

**BE CLEAN!**

And so, we can go from this place in peace.