

The Untouchables
Mark 1:40-45
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Did you know that of the 678 verses in Mark, 198 of them are about miracles. Go ahead, count 'em! I'll wait. That's about 30 percent of the whole book devoted to miracles. There are 18 different miracle stories in Mark's 16 chapters, and 13 of those are healings. Obviously, Mark was fascinated with this aspect of Jesus' ministry. Of all the things he could report, and we have to imagine there was an endless supply of stories about Jesus, Mark chose to focus on the miracle stories.

But why this one? Remember, Mark is by far the shortest gospel, so we have to pay attention to every word and story choice. If it's in there, it must mean something. We know that Jesus did a lot of healing in his ministry. He raised people from the dead, restored sight to the blind, made the lame walk. In fact, just a few verses prior to our story, Mark writes, "That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door and Jesus healed many who had various diseases." If that's true, if Jesus is as busy as Mark says he is, why single out this story? Is there something special here we're supposed to see?

One of my favorite movies of all time is "The Untouchables." Much of it was filmed in Chicago, where I used to serve, and I can still remember the first time I was in Union Station and walked past the staircase where they filmed the famous baby-carriage-pushed-down-the-stairs scene. I had stepped onto holy ground! I was tempted to find a stroller and push it down the stairs to see if I could recapture the moment, but I couldn't find any babies will to participate.

In case you aren't familiar with the film, Kevin Costner plays Elliott Ness, who goes on a Prohibition-fueled crusade against the evil gangster Al Capone, played by Robert DeNiro. Because Ness was so successful at thwarting Capone's mob business and avoided several assassination attempts, he and his gang were called "The Untouchables," people who were larger than life, who seemed to be above the natural pecking order. The not only upheld the law, they were the law. You don't mess with "The Untouchables."

Jesus is the Elliott Ness of our story today, a one-man crusade against evil. In the span of the first 45 verses of Mark, Jesus calls his supporting cast of disciples to help him, rebukes a demon, heals Simon's mother-in-law, cures a whole crowd, preaches in Galilee, and then cleanses our leper, managing to mix in some downtime for prayer. Those who saw Jesus in action must have thought he was larger than life, that he was above the natural pecking order they knew, that he was the law. You don't mess with Jesus.

But there's another untouchable in this story, and he in no way bears a resemblance to Jesus or Elliott Ness or any other hero. The unnamed leper is untouchable for a completely different reason. We don't know if the disease he had was actually leprosy or some other skin ailment, but we do know his disease would have been visible to others: discolored patches on the skin, hair falling out, rashes and infected folds on the skin.

We also know how people with skin diseases were treated in those days. The law in the book of Leviticus spends two whole chapters, 116 verses, detailing how to deal with leper, including the intense and lengthy purification rituals that must be endured for a cured leper to be considered clean. While they were sick, lepers were the scourge of society. Because leprosy was highly contagious, some people threw rocks at lepers to keep them at a distance. The leper had to

announce his approach with the cry of “Unclean, unclean!” so people would know he was coming. By doing this, the leper was warning people not to come in contact with him, to stay away. The best way to deal with a leper was to not have to deal with a leper. You don’t mess with the untouchables.

But notice in our passage, we don’t hear the leper’s cry. He ignores the laws he is commanded to obey, not keeping his distance, not announcing his approach. He simply strides right up to Jesus, falls to his knees, and says what he knows to be true. “If you choose...you can make me clean.”

So there we have it. A meeting of the untouchables. Clean and unclean. Holy and unholy. Sacred and profane. Divinity and humanity. How will Jesus respond to this intrusion, this seemingly hopeless case? Verse 41 is an interesting little word study. In the translation we read this morning, it says Jesus was “moved with pity” by this man. But other translations vary widely, because the Greek word used here could either mean pity or anger. Some translations try to capture both sentiments, like the one that said Jesus look upon the man with “warm indignation.” Sounds like a dessert, doesn’t it?

I understand his pity. But why would Jesus look upon this man with anger? Jesus had just gotten away from a crowd of people wanting healing, so maybe he was angry to be confronted with yet another case. Maybe Jesus was upset that the leper didn’t follow protocol when approaching him. Maybe he was mad because the leper was putting Jesus in harm’s way by potentially contaminating him. Or maybe Jesus was angry because this man represented society’s unwillingness to touch those who most needed help.

So he does something about it. Back then, if you touched a leper, you were considered as unclean as the leper was, and you were treated the same way. If you reached out to them, you became one of them. By touching this man, Jesus was in effect putting himself alongside the leper, taking on the same humiliation and limitations the law placed on the leper. Jesus was willing to risk his own health, his own status, even his own life, for this man. And what happens when the divine in Jesus touches the humanity in the leper? Healing happens.

And it’s not just a physical healing. The leper wanted more than a change in skin texture. He wanted to be made whole, to be restored in society, to be welcomed back into the world as a human being, not an untouchable. Even though he still must undergo the ritual purification, which Jesus instructs him to do, Christ has taken his brokenness, his physical and spiritual incompleteness, and made him whole.

Let me look around here. No, I don’t see any lepers with us this morning. No ulcerating skin, no nodules with foul discharges, some loss of hair, but I’ll write that off as natural. Physically, we all look to be leprosy-free. Of course looks can be deceiving. What looks on the outside like a disfigured, disgusting leper could really be a decent human being yearning for a chance to be whole. And what looks on the outside like a normal, healthy person could be someone suffering from emotional or spiritual leprosy. We all have those discolored patches, the ones that omit a foulness that seeps into and infects the rest of our lives. There’s something in our life that keeps us from being whole before God. There’s someplace where we are incomplete. Broken relationships, hasty judgments about people, addictions, infidelities, pride, hatred, racism - all these things make us unclean, and we all suffer. Part of being human is admitting that we are less than perfect and that we need healing.

And that’s what we have been offered. Through his death and resurrection, through the gift of bread and cup, through the gathering of this body, Christ has reached out his hand to us and offered a healing touch. When Christ’s divinity meets our humanity, healing begins again.

Regardless of the afflictions and the seriousness of the symptoms, each week at the table we are told over and over again, “I choose. Be made clean!”

The irony here is that the leper is made clean by a touch, when such a thing is usually thought to spread uncleanness. At the church I served in seminary, when the time came for communion, people didn't pass bread trays. They passed the bread. The picked up the loaf, tore off a piece and handed the loaf to the next person. So the cold germs from the person in the first row were shared with everyone else in their section. I don't think that's what is meant by “spreading the gospel.”

Reaching out makes us vulnerable. It puts us at risk. Jesus could have walked right by this person, ignored this need, not put his own freedom at risk. The man simply could have stayed sick. You don't mess with the untouchables. And yet when Jesus looks at him, he gets angry at what he sees. And he does something about it.

Are there still untouchables today? I asked that question to the folks at the Sermon Talkback and we made this list: people with AIDS, child molesters, the homeless, Muslims, people of different races, Hispanic immigrants, the mentally and physically disabled. Each of us has our own list of untouchables. Who is it for you? Jesus shows us that behind the labels and stereotypes and our own fears are real human beings who are yearning for a chance to be whole. And it's our job to show them the healing touch of Christ.

But in order to bring healing, we have to get involved. We can't just walk by and ignore the need while people go on being sick. If they are going to experience God's healing love, it will come through us, the hands and feet of Jesus. We live out what we have received from Christ, the one who came to earth to dwell among us, who dared to touch us untouchables, bringing us hope and love and healing. Pastor Will Willimon says, “Jesus got what we got so that we may get what he has.” We've got it, thank you Jesus. But now what? Do we not risk getting our hands dirty and just walk on by? That's safer, you know. Cleaner. More convenient. Or do we reach out our hand, touch the untouchable, dare to make a difference in the life of someone this world has discarded? We've got what Jesus has given us – love, forgiveness, compassion, the resources to help. So what are we going to do with it?