

Jesus, Friend of...the Sick  
Mark 1:40-45  
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One of the standard provocative questions that we preachers are fond of asking says, “If Jesus were alive today, who would he hang out with?” We usually pause and squint for a more dramatic effect. We ask that because we want to point out that Jesus probably wouldn’t hang out with us, no matter how cool and hip and popular we like to think we are. In the gospels, Jesus hung out with misfits and outcasts and the kind of people that our kind of people didn’t hang out with. As much as we would like to think Jesus would be our friend, the reality is that Jesus was more likely to be friends with people who didn’t have friends like us.

For our sermons during the season of Lent, we’re going to spend some time with the people who were friends with Jesus – the sick, the poor, women, children, the mentally ill, and foreigners. Spending time with these folks may make us a bit uncomfortable, but that’s OK, because if we’re striving to do this faith thing right, then Jesus should make us a bit uncomfortable, calling us to go to places and associate with people that we would otherwise avoid. If these are friends of Jesus, maybe they should be our friends, too.

We start with the sick. 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 miraculous healing stories.

That highlights the fact that Jesus spent a lot of time with sick people. Some he sought out and others sought him out, but we hear over and over again about Jesus hanging with the blind, the lame, the people with withered hands and leprosy, and dead people, which is about the worst kind of sick you can be. Rather than shying away from them or institutionalizing them, Jesus spends time with them, treats them like human beings, and heals them.

One of my favorite movies of all time is “The Untouchables.” In case you aren’t familiar with the film, Kevin Costner plays Elliott Ness, who goes on a 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 gets baptized, 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, 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 truly leprosy or some other skin ailment, but we do know his disease would have been visible to others: ulcerated skin, infected nodules with foul discharges, hair falling out.

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 lepers, including the intense and lengthy purification rituals that must be endured for a cured leper to be considered clean. 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 sick person who has invaded his space? 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 something you’d order at the Cheesecake Factory, 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, to treat the sick like human beings.

So, Jesus 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. He is no longer defined by his sickness; he is once again a human being.

I don’t think we have any lepers with us this morning. I don’t see any 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. In the next chapter of Mark, Jesus will be criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners. He responds, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

By that definition, we're ALL sick. 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 sick 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 uncleanliness. At the church I served in seminary, when the time came for communion, people didn't pass bread trays. They passed the bread. They 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 a group of folks once and got this list: the homeless, Muslims, people of different races, Hispanic immigrants, the mentally and physically disabled, convicted felons. 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?