

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 2/12/06
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Mark 1:40-45

Today's story from the Gospel of Mark is a text that has layers of meaning beneath the seemingly straightforward narrative that we've just heard. This is one of those passages the context of which is important to understand as we try to engage it personally.

In this story, a man who is suffering from leprosy comes to Jesus, seeking relief from his condition. He recognizes and acknowledges that the healing power of God is present in Jesus. "If you choose," he says to Jesus, "you can make me clean." Jesus responds, "I do choose." Jesus' touch cures the man of his disease.

This sounds like just one more healing story among many in Mark's gospel. But there's more to it than that. In Jesus' time, a "leper" was someone who suffered from one of any number of skin diseases, some of which were much more serious than others. A person with such a skin disease was considered "unclean." Being labeled "unclean" wasn't about being contagious. The religious tradition of Israel stressed that the people of Israel were to be holy, because the Lord their God was holy. To approach the holy God, one must be, as much as was humanly possible, without imperfection, because God was perfect. So a complex system of ritual purity laws was established, the purpose of which was to define what or who was clean or not, and what one needed to do to be restored to purity when life's circumstances rendered one unclean. A person with a blatant physical imperfection couldn't possibly be holy as the Lord God was holy. And contact with someone who was considered "unclean" would contaminate or pollute anyone who had been "clean" before that contact.

Because someone with a skin disease was considered unclean, he or she would have to remain apart from all aspects of normal, day to day life, so as not to render others, with whom he or she might come into contact, unclean. When someone with a skin disease was in the vicinity of others, he or she would have to warn the others of his or her presence, by shouting, "Unclean, unclean," so that the others could leave the area and not become contaminated themselves by being near the leper. The unclean person couldn't work with others; couldn't participate in the worshipping community; couldn't take part in family events. The unclean person was isolated; virtually an outcast.

So when the leper in this story recognizes that in Jesus, God's power to heal is present and available, he takes a huge risk. Rather than shouting the warning, "Unclean," as was the rule, to warn Jesus to stay away, the man approaches Jesus and kneels directly in front of him. Jesus' very real choice here is whether or not to back away and maintain the proper distance between himself and this man, so that Jesus' own purity isn't compromised. When the leper says to Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean," he's not only talking about whether or not Jesus is able or willing to effect a cure for his disease. He's also talking about whether Jesus will choose to draw near to someone whom society has chosen to cast off, or to keep his distance.

Jesus chooses to draw near. In doing so, he puts himself in the position of becoming unclean; of becoming an outcast. Jesus stretches out his hand and touches the man who has sought him out. With Jesus' touch, the man's skin disease is gone. But it's so much more than that. The man's physical condition has been cured, a fact that is affirmed by the priest to whom the man is subsequently sent by Jesus. As well, the man has been fully and completely restored as a human being of dignity and worth. He's been restored to health, to renewed relationship with his family and friends, to his ability to work, to his community of faith, to his society. The man's disease has been cured and his life made new. As well, his family, his circle of friends, his workplace, and his religious community have been made new because the one who was lost to them has been restored.

How is this story relevant for us today? At least two things stand out for me, as I ponder the implications of this text. First, Jesus' choice to draw near to the leper and to touch him convicts me of the many ways in which I don't do that. I'm often able to keep myself quite distant from those for whom I pray and claim to be concerned. We consistently pray for the people of Sudan when we gather for worship. I subscribe to an internet news service that's intended to keep citizens abreast of what's going on in Darfur. But I'm ashamed to admit the number of times that I delete the emails that I receive even before reading them, because I think I'm too busy with other things. When I do read them, I seldom follow the suggestions about the concrete things that I, personally, can do to make a difference. I haven't yet attended a gathering here in town of the Croton Interfaith Council on Darfur. For lots of reasons, I've chosen to maintain plenty of distance from that very real suffering.

Second, today's gospel story points out how very limited my understanding of healing tends to be. When I pray for someone to be healed, I'm usually focused on a specific physical, emotional, or psychological condition being cured. Healing is so much broader than that. Healing includes doing everything possible to relieve the isolation of the one who suffers through the provision of a loving presence, of meals, of housework or the running of errands. Healing is also about the restoration to fullness of life – to one's family and friends, one's workplace, one's position and function in society, one's faith community. Healing even involves families and communities being made new because the one who was lost to them has been restored. How many instances of healing I'm privileged to witness when I consider healing in this broader context! How many more opportunities I have to be personally engaged in the ministry of healing when I don't focus solely on the curing of a particular condition.

Jesus chose not to distance himself from those around him who suffered, but to draw very near to them. Jesus chose not only to cure the sick, but also to renew and restore those in need to new and abundant life, and to renew and restore the communities from which they had come, as those who suffered were drawn back in from the margins of life to which they had been relegated. As followers of Jesus, we're called to do the same. Through Christ's presence and power, may it be so. Amen.