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Roland Park Presbyterian Church
Ordinary 6 (Year B09)

Psalm 30
Mark 1: 40-45

The Stain of Joy

It's getting a little frustrating, isn't it? I don't know about you, but it's starting to get on my nerves! We are *still* in Mark, chapter 1. This is the fourth consecutive week, and fifth week overall in the New Year that the lectionary has prescribed a passage from Mark, chapter 1 as our Gospel Lesson. It makes it hard to believe that Mark really is the shortest of the four Gospels, doesn't it? And, to be quite frank, it seems like we are hearing variations of the same basic story, over and over and over again. What is the point? Why are we spending so much time in the same place?

Well, if you share in my frustration, we may be in good company. You may remember that in last week's Gospel lesson Jesus visits the house of Simon's mother-in-law. She has a fever and is in bed. He lifts her up and heals her. Word gets out and soon the whole town is knocking at the door asking to be healed by Jesus: one after another after another. All day they come seeking him! The next morning Jesus gets up early to pray and be alone. To be sure he won't be disturbed he goes out to a deserted place. But, he isn't left alone long. The disciples hunt him down and let him know that the people are searching for him, presumably for more healings. At this point Jesus is faced with a choice, a fork in the road: go back to the town and continue his healing ministry or move on. He chooses the latter stating, "Let's go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do." This is interesting, because it implies that while Jesus' mission is obviously not opposed to healing, it certainly isn't solely defined by it either.

That is where we left off last week. And notice where we pick up this week. Jesus is once again faced with someone in need of healing, this time a leper. So, to quickly review: he has cast out a demon in a synagogue, he has healed people in private and public and now he is faced with a disease that brings with it such intense social stigma. The translation I read from this morning says that when approached by this man Jesus is “moved with pity.” However, the footnotes, as well as other translations, indicate a different phrase. Instead of “moved with pity,” they tell us that Jesus is “angry.” We don’t usually like to think of Jesus as angry, but when we remember the ending of last week’s passage, perhaps we can understand his frustration. Jesus has just made the decision to move on, both in location as well as onto the next stage of his ministry. There seems to be some worry here that he will get pegged as a faith healer. Jesus seems to be trying to avoid that label, but the people in need of healing just keep showing up, and what is he supposed to do? And so, in the first chapter of Mark, that is what we get, healing story after healing story.

Last week I reflected on my experience as a chaplain intern in a hospital. I shared the experience of being called into the room of an AIDS patient who was in isolation. At first, I made the mistake of thinking that the mask, gown and gloves were for my protection. But, of course, they were not. She was the one with the compromised immune system. (I had not planned on sharing that encounter. In fact, I didn’t remember it until I was delivering the sermon, but then the memory of it came to me so strongly, before I knew what I was doing I was sharing it with all of you. I didn’t really finish the story either. Let me do that now.)

I think she could sense my discomfort. I am sure she was used to it, what with being in isolation and everything. I am also sure she was starved for non-medical human contact and interaction. In fact, that is why she called for the chaplain—not to pray, not to perform a ritual or rite; not to ask a theological question—she just wanted someone as a conversation partner. I stayed for a while and we chatted. At the end, I offered to pray: I was a chaplain after all. I also asked if it would be okay if I held her hands as we prayed. (They taught us always to ask.) She said it would be okay. So, with my latex glove covered hands, I held hers and we prayed. At the end, she said thank you. I assumed she meant for the prayer. But she said, “It is nice to have someone just hold my hands.”

That is the thing about diseases like leprosy and AIDS. It’s not just the physical symptoms, it is the isolation. Do you remember where Jesus was when he met the leper? In the deserted place he had fled to in order to be alone. There is no way this leper could come to Simon’s house. He was not welcome in town. If he showed up at the synagogue, looking for healing, or help, or a handout, or even just to pray, the priest was obliged to expel him immediately.

But, here is Jesus, in the leper’s “neck of the woods.” Not in town. Not in a house. Not in the synagogue, but out in the deserted place. Jesus had crossed over into his territory and he wasn’t done yet. The man was probably just so glad to see someone out there who was not disease ridden like him. He desperately approaches Jesus, begging, on his knees. He says, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” We assume he is saying this to Jesus because he has identified him as a healer, as a man of God. But what if that is just what the man always said to people. “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Notice, he doesn’t say, “You can heal me or remove my leprosy.” He says, “You

can make me clean,” which refers not to the disease but to the social stigma attached to it. And how does Jesus respond, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Then he reaches out and touches him!

He then instructs this man who had been exiled, to march himself back into town, knock on the door of the synagogue and to show himself to the priests there. You know, I am beginning to think that perhaps Jesus’ anger isn’t directed at this man after all. Perhaps he isn’t annoyed that one more person is looking for healing. Maybe he is mad at something bigger. Maybe he is mad at a society that simply discards what it fears or does not understand. Maybe he is upset at a system that would instruct one human being to look at another and say, “I am sorry, but you have to get out of here. The community doesn’t have room for you. You are not welcome here!” It says something doesn’t it, that Jesus is more concerned with the social and religious ramifications of the disease than the physical symptoms themselves? Whatever else this healing is about, the meaningful result is the restoration of this outcast individual into the life of the community.

Perhaps the best description of healing I have ever read comes from James Cotter, in the book *Healing—More or Less*: “The whole of me, the whole person, physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, is in need of being healed, of being made whole. The curing of physical symptoms is but one part of this process: the absence of a cure need not hinder it...The words ‘healing’ and ‘salvation’ are close: they derive from the same Greek root, ‘*sozein*.’ We experience moments of salvation, the gift of grace and freedom, of breathing again in wide open spaces, of being sprung from the trap, released from confinement and oppression. My own healing is bound up with that of others. I need to pray and work for the healing of nations, for food for the hungry, for justice for the

downtrodden, for my neighbors in a global village. Without their well-being I cannot be completely well.”¹ We are not made to be alone. Community is where we find meaning and connection. In it we give and are given. Without it, we are cut off from our whole selves. But, the truth is that it is not always the community that exiles individuals, sometimes we are the ones to shut ourselves off from the community.

Bill O’Hanlon tells the story² of a woman living in Milwaukee who had become severely depressed. “She was in her sixties and had medical problems that put her in a wheel chair and severely curtailed her social activities. She had begun to hint to her nephew that she was thinking of suicide.” The nephew had a friend who was a well known psychologist, Milton Erickson. He called him and asked him to do him a favor and visit his aunt.

“She met [him] at the door and gave him a tour of her large house. She had had the house remodeled to allow wheel-chair access, but other than that, it appeared that nothing had been changed [for a very long time.] The furniture and household decorations showed a faded glory, smelling of must. Erickson was struck by the fact that all the curtains were kept closed, making the house a depressing place indeed. The aunt had saved the very best for last, however, and finally ushered Erickson into the greenhouse nursery attached to the house. This was her pride and joy; she had a green thumb and spent many hours working with the plants. She proudly him her latest project—taking cuttings from her African violets and starting new plants.

¹ James Cotter, “More Than Cure,” in *Healing—More or Less* (Sheffield: Cairns Publications, 1990), 3-5.

² Found in his book, *Do One Thing Different* (New York: Quill, 1999), 6-7.

In the discussion that followed, Erickson found out that the woman was very isolated. She had previously been quite active in her local church, but since her confinement to a wheelchair she attended church only on Sundays. Because there was no wheelchair access to the church, she hired her handyman to give her a ride and lift her into the building after service had begun so she wouldn't disrupt the flow of [traffic.] She also left before the service ended, again so she wouldn't [be in the way.]

After hearing her story, Erickson told her that her nephew was worried about how depressed she had become. She admitted that it had become quite serious. But he told her that he thought the depression was not the real problem. It was clear to him that the problem was that she was not being a very good Christian. She was taken aback by this and began to bristle, until he explained.

“Here you are with all this money, time on your hands, and a green thumb. And it's all going to waste. What I recommend is that you get a copy of your church membership list and then look in the latest bulletins. You'll find announcements of births, illness, graduations, engagements, and marriages in there—all the happy and sad events in the life of people in the congregation. Make a number of African violet cuttings and get them well established. Then repot them in gift pots and have your handyman drive you to the homes of these people. Bring them a plant and your congratulations or condolences, whichever is appropriate.”

Hearing this, the woman agreed that perhaps she had fallen down in her Christian duty and agreed to do more. Ten years later when the woman passed away the caption to her obituary read, “African Violet Queen of Milwaukee Died, Mourned by Thousands.” It went on to detail the life of this incredibly caring woman who had become famous for her trademark flowers and charitable work.

The first chapter of Mark is all about healing, not just the curing of symptoms but the restoration of individuals to community and purpose. It is about removing the stain of sin and sickness, from individuals and from societal and religious systems, and replacing it with the stain of joy being in communion with God and others, a joy so deep that even when told to keep quiet, *we* cannot help but share it.

Let us pray: Sometimes, O God, we find ourselves on the outside, wanting to get in. Sometimes we find ourselves estranged from home. Whether our exile is self-imposed or placed on us by others, it is very real. Give us faith and courage, O God, to cross over those barriers which keep us from one another, and keep us from our true selves, that keep us from being the people that you created us to be. And yet, even as we recognize our need for healing, we thank you for the promise that, when all things come to pass, nothing will separate us from your love. Amen.