

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 15, 2009
Text: Mark 1:40-45
The Reverend David B. Hodges

On a number of occasions when I have gone to CMC (Carolinas Medical Center) or Presbyterian Hospital to visit and pray with someone, I have found a sign on the door of the room that says that special precautions are being taken and all visitors should check in at the nursing station. What that most often means is that the patient has been quarantined in some way to prevent infection and to limit the contact they have with anyone else. What it also usually means is that if you are allowed into the room, you have to put on a gown, gloves, a mask and sometimes even something to cover your hair.

Even though I certainly always comply and completely understand the need for quarantine, it always makes things a little awkward during the visit. Having to wear all that stuff and knowing that the person has had to be isolated creates a kind of barrier between us. Even though we can still talk to each other, and sometimes we can still hold hands or touch while we pray, it always feels like there is something between us. If nothing else, the warning sign on the door creates distance, and places the person who is sick in the position of being somewhat isolated and alone until their immunity is no longer in danger.

"When anyone has a swelling or a rash or a bright spot on his skin that may become an infectious skin disease, he must be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons who is a priest. The priest is to examine the sore on his skin, and if the hair in the sore has turned white and the sore appears to be more than skin deep, it is an infectious skin disease. When the priest examines him, he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean. "The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp (Leviticus 13:1-3; 45-46, NIV).

That description of how someone with an infectious skin disease was to be treated is found in the Bible, in the book of Leviticus, and it sounds harsh because it is. Though Leviticus, which is found in the Old Testament, is described as being a ***book of worship*** (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV, p. 125, OT) for the Jewish people, it is also filled with religious laws and with instructions on how to abide by those laws, and how the priests were to carry out the administration of the law along with their ceremonial duties. The importance of the law and following the law has been described this way:

God has provided the means of grace whereby the people, forgiven and restored, may live in the presence of the holy God, avoiding those things that contaminate their health and well-being, and doing those things that make them a holy people (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV, p. 25, OT).

It cannot be overemphasized how important it was to the people of Israel that they keep themselves ceremonially clean and away from anything, *anything*, that would cause them to become unclean. Now in the part of Leviticus I just read, we hear that in a situation where a person had a disease like leprosy, which is what the man who came to Jesus begging for healing had, that person

was to be labeled by the priest as being unclean, and then he or she had to let everyone they came into contact with know that they were unclean. But that's not all! As long as the person was unclean, they *had* to live alone in a perpetual state of quarantine. No Jew who was ritually clean was allowed to have any contact with someone like that.

So now having that in mind, listen again to the first part of the story told to us from Mark's Gospel about a man who had leprosy who approaches Jesus.

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. (1:40-42, NIV)

There are several things in this encounter that are important because of what Jesus said and what he did, and they are part of what makes this story important for us to read and to learn from.

The first is thing that is important is really pretty simple: Jesus responded. He responded, willingly we are told, to a person that he probably had never even seen before. Jesus willingly responded to someone who just came up to him while he was traveling and dropped to his knees wanting nothing more than to be healed. ***If you are willing***, he said, ***you can make me clean.***" And to that Jesus chose to respond. He could have ignored him. He could have sent someone else to talk to him. But he didn't. He responded.

The second thing is connected to the first because it relates to *the way* in which Jesus responded. We're told that when he chose to respond, he did so because he was filled with compassion. Jesus' response came not out of some sense of obligation, or because someone told him that he should respond to this particular man, or because the begging man wouldn't go away. What seems to have moved Jesus to respond to an unclean person, to someone he wasn't supposed to even get close to, was compassion.

The third thing that is important in this encounter has to do with faith that -- thing we talk a lot about, but that we know is often very difficult to have. In faith, and maybe also because he had nothing to lose, this quarantined, ostracized man was willing to approach Jesus, somehow knowing that if Jesus was willing he could bring healing to his diseased body. In faith, the man got down on his knees and begged for something that at that point he could only hope would happen -- and it did.

The other important thing that happened in this encounter with a ritually pure Jewish man like Jesus, and a man covered with leprosy, was that Jesus reached out and touched him. Whatever religious, physical, and social barriers there were between them vanished when Jesus was willing to reach and touch. *I am willing, he said. Be clean!* (1:41). At that point the quarantine was over, and this man not only experienced physical healing, but because Jesus was willing, because Jesus was

compassionate, and because Jesus touched him, he was brought back into the community. Once again, he had a place and he belonged. And you know what he did? Well, he did *not* do what Jesus told him to do, which was to be quiet. No, he began to tell everyone he came in contact with about what had happened and how he had been made whole.

Those things are important in this story because they give us an idea about who Jesus was, about how Jesus was able to bring wholeness and healing to sick and broken people, about how Jesus was willing to respond, to touch and to be with people like this man, who, because of disease or behavior or something else, had been made unclean, and in many cases banned from their religious and social communities.

What Jesus did that day is what Jesus is asking us to do today. What Jesus did gives us a great example of what it means to practice and to live out radical hospitality, welcoming and inviting those we have never seen before into our lives and into this parish. What Jesus did is what happens in many forms of ministry here at Holy Comforter day after day, through things like Room in the Inn, that provides the homeless a place to stay and food to eat during the winter months. What Jesus did is what happens five days a week when the Loaves and Fishes pantry here provides groceries to the working poor and to those who are facing economic crisis. What Jesus did is what happens when

people go on mission trips to places in this country and abroad, interacting with others and providing helping and compassionate hands. What Jesus did is what happens when a Stephen Minister enters into a personal and confidential relationship with someone who needs support and someone to talk to. What Jesus did is what will happen on Tuesday of this week, and whenever there is a funeral, and members of the Lazarus Team willingly reach out with compassion to support a grieving family. What Jesus did is what the hosts are trained to do, and what all of us are encouraged to do, every time we gather for worship and look for those who are visiting and who may be looking to find God in their lives, and we invite them in.

After he healed the man, Jesus told him this. ...*Go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing.* What happened to that man when he was healed of his disease was only part of what he needed, and it probably wasn't the most important thing. By telling him to go to the priest, Jesus was helping to ensure that his healing went beyond the physical cure. Jesus willingly responded to him, willingly touched him, willingly spoke to him with compassion, and willingly helped him to come out of quarantine and to have a place again. And even though we aren't told that it was part of his reaction, what happened that day surely allowed that man to see and to know the power, the grace, and the love of God in his life.

My hope and my prayer for each of us is that we will allow ourselves to be willing to find a way to respond, to reach out, and to touch with compassion those who are in need, those who have for whatever reason have been pushed out, and all those that God puts in our way. ***Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing..."*** he said. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.