

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
Sixth Sunday in Epiphany
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The Stories of a Leper

Rev. Dan A. Smith

The Lesson: Mark 1:40-45

In Monty Python's brilliantly irreverent classic film *The Life of Brian*, the main character happens to be born on the original Christmas day, December 25th, of course, in the stable right next door. Throughout the movie, indeed throughout the life of Brian, he is repeatedly mistaken for the messiah. In one especially sharp-witted scene, Brian is walking through an ancient village where he is approached by a beggar who asks him for money. Brian's first response is no, so the beggar starts to bargain:

"Okay. What say you open at one shekel? I start at two thousand. We close about eighteen hundred."

Not a chance.

"Seventeen-fifty?"

Go away!

"Seventeen-forty?"

Brian doesn't budge.

Finally the beggar gives in.

"All right, sir. My final offer: half a shekel, for an old ex-leper!"

"Did you say ex-leper?" Brian asks.

"That's right, sir. Sixteen years behind the bell, and proud of it, sir." (Realize that lepers carried bells or clappers to alert passersby that they carried the contagious disease.)

Brian asks the ex-leper what happened.

"I was cured, sir." "It was a bloody miracle."

"Who cured you?" Brian asks.

"Jesus did, sir. I was hopping along, minding my own business. All of a sudden, up he comes. Cures me. One minute I'm a leper with a trade, next minute my livelihood's gone. ...Bloody do-gooder."

Brian responds, "Well, why don't you go and tell him you want to be a leper again?"

“Ah, yeah. I could do that, sir. Yeah. Yeah, I could do that, I suppose. What I was thinking was, I was going to ask him if he could make me a bit lame in one leg during the middle of the week. You know, something beggable, but not leprosy, which is a pain in the arse, to be blunt.”

Brian finally relents and hand him a coin for which the ex-leper begins to thank him profusely, until he realizes what a small coin it is.

“Thank you, sir. Thank y....Half a denari for me bloody life story?”

Brian shrugs and starts to walk away. “There’s no pleasing some people,” to which the ex-leper shouts after him: “Yeah...that’s just what Jesus said, sir.”

Laugh if you will, even despite my appallingly bad British accent, but I find this scene to be a wonderfully rich Midrash on those stories wherein Jesus encounters, heals and cleanses lepers, stories like the one we just heard from Mark. What this scene captures, even better than the gospel, is the response I fear many of us would have if we had face-to-face experience with God’s healing power in our lives. Would we let it radically change our stories and our communities? Would we share it for all to hear? Or, like the ex-leper, would we cling to our old life, even begrudging God for changing our life stories, our roles and our everyday script of who we are? I think it’s possible that many of us, myself included, have more in common with the ex-leper from *The Life of Brian* than we do with the real leper in our gospel reading for today. The question on the table is this: How do we live the story of God’s healing touch in our lives?¹

I’ll come back to this in a moment, but first, I need to clarify a few things about today’s gospel reading. Those of you who have studied Mark in our 10:00 a.m. educational hours may have already come across the following tidbits of scholarly background about this passage.

Tidbit #1: Leprosy in the Bible is not what we might think. If you read the Sunday Times a few weeks back or if you’ve picked up a copy of a recent book by John Tayman entitled *The Colony*, you may have a vivid picture in your mind of this almost unspeakably awful disease. Tayman details the painful history of Molokai, the infamous 19th century leper colony seated in the lush landscapes of Hawaii. To the ancients though, the word “lepra” used in our passage for today, would have conjured a wide range of skin diseases of which modern day leprosy is just one example. Put it this way:

If you have a little psoriasis, which runs in my family, you might be a leper!

If you have a little eczema, you might be a leper!

Even if you have a little of that toenail fungus that pops up from time to time, maybe even athlete’s foot, you better watch out, because you just might be a leper too!

Does all that make you a little nervous? Wait till you see what’s next.

Tidbit #2: If you do happen to be a “leper,” here’s what you would have to do, according to the Mosaic codes articulated in Leviticus Chapters 13 and 14. These chapters read more like an ancient dermatology textbook than they do a bible. First, you would need to undergo a thorough examination by the local priest, where he would carefully check for the redness or whiteness of your skin, for the thinness or yellowness of your hair, for boils and burns and spots and blemishes. After all that and more, if you are deemed by a priest to be ritually impure and unclean, you would be required by law to wear torn clothes and to keep your hair disheveled so that anyone who sees you can know that you have a skin disease. If that’s not enough, you’d have to shout to anyone and everyone within the range of your voice, “Unclean! Unclean!” If you don’t believe it, look it up. Chapter 13, verse 45.

Tidbit #3: Finally, when we read biblical stories about “lepers” being healed, we must understand that we are talking about more than the elimination of a physical disease. After hearing the Biblical instruction to lepers, we begin to get a wider picture of the devastating social and emotional components of leprosy—the utter rejection and isolation from community and the ensuing loneliness. So when the “leper” says “make me clean!” to Jesus in our passage for today, he’s using the ancient Jewish cultural and religious categories of cleanliness and uncleanness. He’s asking Jesus not merely to heal his bodily ailments but to nourish his dying soul that is starving for contact with others and with his religious community. In almost every way but the physical, lepers were pronounced dead to the rest of the community—marginalized, untouchable, invisible, and cast out. A true healing of a person’s leprosy would need to happen on many levels, physical, social and religious. Of course, Jesus knew this better than most.

Okay. I offer this background in part because I know that when some of you listen to a story of Jesus’ healing, your first response is, “But I don’t believe in miracles!” Fair enough, but if that’s your only effort with this passage, I worry that you’ll miss the real point, namely that Jesus seems to give this leper not only a cure for the disease and what would feel like a brand new body. As importantly, if not more importantly, Jesus gives the leper a new story to tell about his life, the story of a person who can engage fully with the world. Mind you, this is not the classic story of a leper! We know already the role they have to play in most cases, the script that society has assigned to them, right? But this particular leper somehow steps off the usual storyline to kneel down before Jesus and to talk to him, a clean person. This would have been unheard of in those days.

Well, our passage says that when the leper did this, Jesus was moved to pity. A more literal translation would be to say Jesus’ “guts were churning.” He was moved to more than pity. He was moved to commitment! He was moved to action! For everyone else in the community, the leper’s story could be summarized in just two words, “Unclean!

Unclean!” No further action required. But Jesus could see a new story unfolding. He could imagine God at work in this leper, writing words of love and care upon his heart. He could look beneath this man’s skin and there he could see so much more than the story of yet another leper. He saw the amazing and remarkable story of a child of God! And so, he does something that never ever happens in classic stories of lepers: Jesus touches him! In so doing, he finishes turning the page from the old story to a new one. He opens to a clean page.

One more piece of retelling before I come back to that opening question. You see, Jesus also had a role to play and a new story to live in this passage. He knew his role for a short time at least was to be a healer, but he didn’t want to stay in that role any more than the leper wanted to remain a leper. Perhaps the reason he tells the leper to keep all this healing stuff quiet is because he didn’t want the community to box him in, to suffocate him with their demands for ever more individual healings. He has a bigger role to play after this first chapter of Mark. He needs to step up from being a common healer and miracle worker to being the true Messiah (as in, not the guy born in the manger next door). He was to be more than a healer of individuals. He would become a healer of nations! When he commands the leper to seek out priests, to follow the Mosaic code and to go to them with a testimony of what has happened, he sends the leper as a prophetic witness to the power of God’s love and healing to touch even the untouchable, even the least of these.

If we can read between the lines, we realize that Jesus did far more than heal a leper and send him back to his community. Jesus is trying to change not only the story of a leper but also the story of a whole community of God’s children. By choosing the leper, just as Jesus chose the poor, and the blind, prostitute, the tax collector, and by making each of them “clean,” Jesus invites him into an entire community of the marginalized, isolated, and rejected. In short, Jesus invites him into the Kingdom of God. By confusing the traditional ideas about who is clean and unclean, Jesus in some ways tells us that we are all lepers!

So, having said all that, how do we live the story of God’s healing in our lives? I fear some of us do as the ex-leper from *The Life of Brian* does. We’d just as soon pretend that God’s healing touch makes no difference in our lives. We go on living our old scripts, unable to adjust. We joke about how God is maybe trying to tell us something but more often than not, we continue with that same old script.

Or, maybe, just maybe, we can learn from the leper in Mark. We get down on our knees, and over time, or sometimes out of sheer necessity, we gather up the courage to ask God to give us a new story for our lives. Imagine it! Could it be that one of those semi-conscious reasons we come to church is in part because we’re worried about filling the roles that society has carved out for us, that we want to get beyond the labels and all those

things that would ordinarily divide us. Could it be that we don't want our lives looking like the stereotypes associated with our jobs, or our family roles, or our race or class or sexual orientation? Like the leper, we ask God to give us a new story for our lives, to paint a fuller picture of what our lives can be. But like the ex-leper, we are hard to please! We want to have this new story on our terms, and often with as little change as possible. What's more, we come to church to hear a new story for our world.

We all know too well the stories of the world as it is, war and division, pandemics and violence, poverty and injustice. One need only read the headlines of a paper to find this out. But we come because God invites us into a new story, a story of the world as it should be and the only way to connect to that story is to tell our own new stories. Like the leper, we can testify and confrontationally bear witness to God's healing work in our lives. As our work with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization has taught us, there is power in these stories, even political power in a well-told story, a story that brings private pain to some public awareness.

On this Joining Sunday at First Church, or what was going to be a Joining Sunday, our scripture invites us to discover and tell a new story about our individual lives and about our communal life. We have a chance to ask God to create in us hearts that do not divide people into clean and unclean, insiders or outsiders, rich or poor, conservative Democrats or liberal Republicans. We have a chance to see with the eyes of Jesus, see ourselves and one another as blemished, but brimming with possibility, ripe for a new life story, and a new story of a connected community. On this Sunday, let God's healing balm touch you. Let God get underneath your skin to write with you a new story about your life, and to write with us, together, a new story of justice and peace for our ever-changing world.

Amen.

¹ *This sermon was preached on the morning of a blizzard. A more intimate than usual service was held in the round, in the chancel, for the 35 or so people that made it to church through the weather. Rev. Smith stopped the sermon at this point and invited the congregation to join in a time of meditative conversation about the power of God's healing touch in their lives and in our community. This time of sharing came to close with the hymn, "There Is a Balm in Gilead."*