

For the people of St. Philip's
Feb 12 2006
B 6 Epiphany
Mark 1; 40-45
Maria Hoecker , preacher

One of the difficulties in reading short sections of Mark each Sunday is that we never get to hear Mark as it was intended to be heard, which is all at once. Most likely this relatively short and action-packed Gospel would have been told from beginning to end in an oral tradition to an attentive audience. They would hear the miracle stories, but they would also hear minutes later about Jesus talking about the kingdom of God and how they were expected to live. They would hear about the villains, the religious authorities who were beginning to plot ways to silence Jesus. The miracles would be just a part of the whole story, an urgent message which always points to Jerusalem, Jesus' coming passion, death, and resurrection.

The healing of the leper, is the only such healing mentioned in Mark. It is the most vivid so far in the narrative of Mark in portraying the humanity of Jesus. He acts with a deep feeling of compassion, and he touches the leper, thereby affirming his own shared humanity and incurring the risk of also being isolated as unclean.

That Jesus healed the leper meant more than a change in an outcast's skin texture. Leprosy as defined in the Bible could be as disfiguring as elephantitis, or as benign as mildew on the walls. But that's not the point. This healing of the leper is not an isolated miracle, it is not a private blessing, it's not another "Jesus healed me" story. Jesus always sought to mend the fabric of healthy relationships within community. By sending the healed leper to the priests for cleansing Jesus strikes a blow at one of the forces in society throughout time which cripples, alienates, and destroys human life. -- Separation from community.

Jesus presents a paradox. Though Jesus violates the purity laws by touching the leper, he orders the healed leper to obey the law and submit to the authority of the community's priests for the ritual of cleansing. He asks that the healed man return to the community elders, return to the church if you will, in order to be reincorporated into the community.

Following the healing, the leper is given two instructions. First, to be quiet about what happened. This is not the case of Jesus using false humility in an effort to advertise his ministry. Jesus wants no part of fame and recognition. He seeks to find people of faith, not notoriety. All the way to the cross Jesus will be trying to transform those who mistakenly think "where the messiah is, there is no misery". Instead, he lives a Gospel message that "where there is misery, there is the messiah."

The second instruction is that the healed man must go back into his community, follow the requirements of the law and participate in the ritual of restoration with the priest.

But the healed leper wasn't quiet about what happened. Perhaps those who witnessed a transformation in him pulled the story of his healing out of him. Perhaps they wouldn't let him go until he told them of this amazing man named Jesus. As Jesus knew would happen, the telling of the Good News brought him fame. The new-found fame created audiences, not congregations of faithful people, and Jesus had to avoid the towns, keeping himself in the country side. Yet still they came.

It is a powerful story, an awesome drama, which when read or heard in one sitting reiterates the theme of Jesus' mission for all of humanity. That is that the Kingdom of God is now. Right here, right now. Jesus continually sought to point us toward God. Jesus sought to show us who God is and what God might be like and how we are to live if we wish to be a part of God's Kingdom.

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On Friday evening I had the honor and privilege of joining some of our youth for a dinner hosted by our youth director at St. Philip's, Steve Womble, to celebrate their approaching Rite 13 service..... It is a rite of passage in which through prayer and a charge given by the parents and priests, the teens physically move across the aisle of the church from sitting with their parents to assembling with their peers. This year Sam, Jessie, Brendon andare celebrated as being on their way to adulthood. As the 9:00 bulletin insert says, they are celebrities.

They are not leaving their parents behind, but they are formally joining a community of peers that extends beyond the intimacy of their families. Symbolically their circles are widened within the church to incorporate their growing independence. Our experience of community begins with our childhood friends who give us the affirmation we seek outside of the family and show us some of the first things about love and kindness. Here in this sacred space there's room for our youth to stretch and grow within the nurture of a circle of peers and the adults who serve as their guides.

At the dinner we all admired the collage posters of Sam, Jessie, and Brendon. These posters contain pictures that span the lives of these fine young men and woman. You can see the posters in the parish house too. It was agreed by all that it seemed like just a blink of the eye since these youngsters went from being little tykes to nearly grown up. The pictures proved it, they once were little kids, and now they aren't. They're growing into their unique selves. Max and Chloe were also in attendance at the dinner and I must admit, it was a little unsettling to sit with the parents and grandparent of these teens and hear that it seemed like just yesterday that their children were the age of mine. I'm not ready for time to go fast forward. Though I know that it is.

But I also felt a great deal of peace. I felt gratitude that there is a community for my children, for myself, here at St. Philip's. That there are people here who will help us all along as we move toward maturity. Folks who will know our names, and remember our shared history. Thankfully, many here have been there, done that with whatever stage of life we may be moving through. Thanks be to God, we need them in our lives to give us perspective and wisdom. There are folks who are our peers in the trenches with us, slogging through the days doing the best they can in the moment. There are folks who love us, and root for us, challenge us, who bring us into the circle, and bless us with their presence in our lives. We dwell in the company of each other. In Christ, we are brothers and sisters in support of each other along the Way.

But we are also charged by the example of Jesus, by the Good News of the Gospel, to move outside of our safe circles to reach out to the outcasts amongst us. Not just to reach out, but to pull them on in. It is good to nestle into our safe communities, our clean communities, but we must always keep our arms open to those who have been thrown out. Who have we cast away? They must be sought out and brought back. We can do no less than what Jesus did. We can be the hands that touch a wounded soul. We can express the words that soothe a troubled spirit. We are called to initiate reconciliation, it is our choice. We can be the arms that hold and hug a person who feels that they are dying inside. We can be a friend who sits and listens and loves because we see a child of God who is in need of our love and presence.

When we have reached out in prayer, in a healing touch, in a word, in a still small voice, and said to someone who feels that they have fallen into the Pit, we discover don't have to say much. All we have to say is "I am here, in Jesus' name, I am here." I am here in this place, in this moment. It is then we know that the Kingdom is now. We know that the Kingdom of God is right here, right now. And we know that in this moment, we too are healed.