

For the people of St. Philip's  
Feb 15, 2009  
B 6 Epiphany  
Mark 1: 40-45  
Maria Hoecker , preacher

Mark is a great story-teller. Can you tell from this Gospel reading?

One of the difficulties in reading short sections of Mark each Sunday is that we never get to hear the Gospel of Mark as it was intended to be heard. Many folks don't realize that this is an epic drama which is meant to be told as a story. Maybe it's because we usually hear Mark's Gospel broken up into little weekly vignettes. The storyline sort of loses its punch when we read it that way, confined to a weekly lectionary. Have you ever noticed that Mark is always saying, "immediately" "this and "immediately" that. There is a intended message of urgency in this drama.

Mark's relatively short and action-packed Gospel was meant to be heard, not read. It was originally told as a story from beginning to end to a live audience. Mark wrote the script in Greek. Mark was an associate of St. Peter and likely wrote his gospel in Rome where Peter was based. Probably this Gospel was written for Gentile readers in general, and for the Christians at Rome in particular. The gospel is usually dated between 65 and 75 AD, sometime shortly after Peter's martyrdom in Rome in 64 AD . Mark told the story first and then Matthew and Luke drew directly from him. Have you ever tried to read the Gospel of Mark from start to finish in one sitting? Try it sometime. Better yet, read it aloud.

Mark's Gospel is blunt and full of action. He uses the word "immediately" no less than eight times. This is an urgency in its telling....we hear it today in fact....."and immediately the leprosy left him" (Mk 1:42). Mark means to tell us that Jesus didn't mess around.

The healing of the leper is the only such healing mentioned in Mark. In this first chapter of the story Mark immediately shows us the humanity of Jesus. Not as a newborn babe, but as a miracle worker, a healer. Jesus, with a deep feeling of compassion, reaches out to an untouchable man. Jesus touches a leper. In reaching out, Jesus also claims his own humanity. He's not too holy to touch the unholy as has been determined by the priests. Back then priests decided who was touchable and who was cast out, but Jesus reached past those rules set by the religious authorities. Jesus intentionally took the risk of also becoming labeled as an untouchable.

When Jesus healed the leper it meant so much more than merely changing the texture of an outcast's skin. 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 torn fabric of relationships within community. By sending the healed leper back to the priests who banished him from the Temple, Jesus strikes a blow at one of the forces in society throughout time which cripples, alienates, and destroys human life. -- Separation from community.

Jesus violated the purity laws by touching the leper, and then he ordered the healed leper to obey the law and submit to the authority of the community's priests for the ritual of cleansing. Jesus insists that the healed man return to the religious community, return to the church if you will, in order to be reincorporated into the community. Jesus asks the leper to quietly return to the same community that cast him out. Do you hear a pattern there? That's what Jesus will be doing later in Jerusalem.

Following the healing, the leper is given two instructions. The first instruction is 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. He does not seek notoriety. All the way to the cross Jesus will be trying to transform those who mistakenly believe that "where the messiah is, there is no misery." Instead, he lives a Gospel message that shows "where there is misery, there is the messiah."

The second instruction that Jesus gives is that the healed man must go back into his community. He must follow the requirements of the law and participate in the ritual of restoration with the priest. We are meant to live in community.

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, immediately, 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.

++++

I wonder. Who are the untouchables in our lives? Who is it that we in the Church have declared to be "unclean"? Who have we cast out? We all do it. Who is outside of our circle? On some level I would guess that each of us has declared there is an untouchable leper in our life. Who would we like to cast out until they change and become more like us? Yes, we all do it. We are human after all. Yet, Mark has brought us an urgent message this morning. This message is charged with Good News. It's calling us to move outside of our safe circles of sameness and reach out to the outcasts we ourselves have pushed away. The outcasts are of our own choosing. We the religious people are always fighting about that, you know, who's in and who's out.

Look around. Who is not here? Who has been pushed out? Where are they right now? Do we care? Jesus is showing US the way back in. We have to be Christ for each other, and we have to pray for the grace to let others be Christ for us.

Forgiveness. Compassion. Love. It begins in our hearts and moves out to the world around us. We love Jesus because he first loved us – warts and all. And in loving us, Jesus gives us power to do the His work.

We come to Jesus begging and we show our true selves. Jesus heals us first and then sends us out to our sisters and brothers with the power of his Spirit. We must be the hands that reach out and heal the wounded outcasts. We are the ones to express the words that soothe a troubled spirit. We can be the arms that reach out and heal people who feel as though they are being pushed away by the church....by us.

All we have to do is make a choice to step forward. "I do choose," says Jesus. Reaching out in prayer, with a healing touch, doesn't require soliloquies. All we have to say is "I am here, in Jesus' name, I am here." I am here in this place, in this moment, and I want you to

be here too. That is when we know that the Kingdom of God is now. We know that the Kingdom of God is right here, right now. And we know that in this moment, when we dare to reach out to those we do not want to touch, we too are healed.