

*Inspired by Love and Anger*

Psalm 30, Mark 1:40-45

Whitefish UMC

February 15, 2009

- † “Confessions of a Hotel Housekeeper,” the headlines screamed. The article promised the sordid truth about the cleanliness of hotel rooms and tips for avoiding germs of all kinds when you travel.
- † Want to know what the dirtiest thing in your hotel room is? Any guesses? It’s the remote control device for the TV. The second most germey item is the bedspread. Travel experts advise this:
- † Carry travel packs of disinfectant wipes and use them on the remote control device as soon as you enter the room. Take the bedspread off and throw it in the corner (no wonder they are dirty!) And rinse the glasses under hot water for two minutes just to be sure they are clean.
- † Don’t you wonder if we’ve carried this obsession with bacteria-free lives a little too far? Some scientists think so; others don’t. And pastors get drawn into the debate as well.
- † When I served the United Methodist Church in Bozeman, home of Montana State University, I quickly learned that how Holy Communion was served was a major source of controversy. The microbiologists in the congregation advocated the little plastic cups and cubes of bread served in the pews. The bread was to be cubed by plastic gloved hands.
- † Others liked coming forward to kneel or receive the elements by intinction (the way we do it here). So we alternated methods; the microbiologists wouldn’t come on intinction days—seriously.

- † I know of one church where the pastor had to ask the people not to use the Wet-Wipes after the Passing of the Peace. It was too disruptive of the liturgy that followed and destructive to the purpose of the greeting. Makes me grateful for all of you—I confess I’ve never seen anyone take out the Purel after exchanging signs of peace!
- † Of course there are those of us who have every reason to fear contamination and communicable disease. Our immune systems might be compromised or we might live with someone who could be seriously endangered by even a common cold.
- † Imagine what it was like in Jesus’ time. Before people figured out that it is bacteria and viruses that spread disease, getting sick was a scary, unknown, unexpected event. Who got sick, why they got sick, why they got well, or didn’t...it was all a mystery.
- † But the ravages of leprosy, the bubonic and pneumonic plagues, influenza, tuberculosis, polio, AIDs—have all infused us with fear over the ages—even after we figured out the cause, the effect, and even the cure.
- † Isolation has been the primary means of warding off illness throughout the course of history, and in some ways it still is. In Jesus’ time, there was nothing wrong with the Levitical mandates that kept all “lepers” “outside the camp.”
- † Bacteriologically the practice made good, hygienic sense. But being branded as a leper was not just a diagnosis. It was a cultural death sentence. Those infected were forever forbidden to participate in a normal social life. They had to give up contact with their family and friends. And they had to give up the possibility of human touch forever.

- † As one writer says, “the enforced isolation required by Levitical law made a physical disease into a spiritual disease, both for those suffering from leprosy, and for those who imposed the law and turned away the lepers in their community.
- † Those with leprosy had their spirit hardened and callused against compassion for another. Every age, every nation, every community, every religion, has its particular lepers. Every culture labels certain people lepers.
- † The lepers in our midst are the ones we fear, the ones who we feel endanger us, the ones who remind us of our own weaknesses, the ones we do not want to see....” (Leonard Sweet)
- † We might ask who the “lepers” of our community are. Are they people whose economic desperation feels like it could be contagious? Are they people who are isolated by mental illness or hopelessness? Or are they the people who we have written off as doomed to failure no matter what?
- † But back to the little story of Jesus and the audacious leper that we just heard read this morning. We’re told that the leper came to Jesus begging, kneeling before him. The nameless leper sought Jesus out, even when he had withdrawn to a deserted place to pray.
- † The leper says: “If you choose, you can make me clean.” The next line poses problems in biblical scholarship. Some translations say, “Moved with *pity*, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do so choose, be made clean!’”
- † Other versions, though, say, “Moved with *anger*, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him....” Makes you wonder, doesn’t it? Was Jesus moved by compassion and love, or was he angry?

- † And why might he be angry? Was he irritated at being interrupted in his solitude and prayer? Or was he angry at the religious purity laws that kept a leper separated from his community and his synagogue and his family? We don't know.
- † And what difference does it make? I suspect his motivation was a mixture of impulses. Anger at the way things were, compassion, impatience, and love probably all entered the mix.
- † But what really matters is what he did. Jesus gave everything he had to give, not to enhance his own power—he understood that true power comes from God, and he had no interest in gaining worldly power—but to empower the powerless.
- † This story appears in a series of healings at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Mark notes that each of these stories involves not just physical healing but a restoration of the person healed into wholeness and a sense of belonging to the community.
- † Each story involved some personal cost to Jesus, too. Because each involved a breaking of barriers to belonging. And when you think of it, that's what true healing involves for us as well.
- † In our Bible study on Wednesday, Berniece and I read this passage. I have a new Bible, and I am very excited about it. It's just been published, and it's the Wesley Study Bible. Under each section, it not only has the usual study comments, but also a reference to the theology or practice of John Wesley and his followers.
- † Because in our leadership retreat we decided to reinforce our Wesleyan/Methodist traditions, and because Wesley's practice has relevance for our ministries of healing, it's good to remember that care for and visiting of the sick is one of his core principles.

- † For Wesley, visiting and healing the sick followed in the example of Jesus. It is a practice of grace that results from being in relationship with God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.
- † Although Jesus was able to both cure and heal the sick, the same is not always true for us. Each of us who has ever sat at the bedside of someone we love, praying for a cure to a life-threatening illness only to watch the person die, knows that we long for both cure and healing.
- † But it doesn't always happen that way, does it? Sometimes the most we can hope for is the healing of the heart and the spirit, even as the body slips into death. It's then that we can practice Wesley's ministry of presence—showing up and caring and praying and staying with someone until the end.
- † That ministry of presence of course involves some risk, doesn't it? To our usual ways of doing things, to our comfort, to our resources of time and money. Wesley believed that the ministry of presence encouraged the sick, enabled the sick to be built up and restored to a sense of belonging and health.
- † It didn't necessarily mean a cure, but it did mean that the sick would not feel isolated and alone. And many of us know all about that sort of ministry and its reality.
- † I think of Dianne and Larry, who show up and help those who are hurt or sick or lonely so often. I'm thankful for the birthday party that Jane and Dianne have planned for Edwin on Monday, in the Veterans' Home, where Ed is recovering.
- † And when you practice that ministry of presence with the sick, you get more than you give. Worried about how Ed was adjusting to his

- new place after his fall, I asked him how he was handling the transition. His answer made me smile and taught me a thing or two.
- † “I always take things as they come,” Ed said. “I don’t worry about what lies ahead, and I’ve always been okay.” What he said next was even more inspiring: “I’ve always taken people as they come, too. No matter where they were from, what nationality, what race, what religion. I just accept them.” No wonder he is so loved.
  - † But there’s more to sickness and healing than individual care. Because there is the matter of society’s illness and structures that keep certain people from the wholeness and inclusion they deserve.
  - † It’s common in church circles and otherwise to argue about what’s more important: helping out individuals or working on the systems that keep people in poverty and the sickness of addictions and hopelessness. We experienced that argument in our meetings in Jacksonville. And we experienced it on the streets outside our hotel.
  - † Some of our greatest theologians and thinkers assert that the greatest problem with North American Christianity is sentimentality. (Hauweras and Volf) We have too often reduced Christianity to being about internal states. “Love” is a set of warm fuzzy feelings, and if you can drum up those feelings, that’s enough.
  - † But that’s not what love is about, is it? The kind of love that Jesus embodies is not particularly sentimental or warm and fuzzy. It comes from anger at the way things are, and a willingness to lay down his life to restore the poor and the outcast to health and wholeness.
  - † One afternoon, on the way back to the hotel for more meetings, a man approached my two friends and me. It was raining, and he had an

- umbrella. He asked if he could walk us back to the hotel and if we could give him some food.
- † We didn't have any food, and it was time to get going. One of us walked on into the hotel. Two of us talked to the man, who said, "I know you're Christians. I know you think if you help me I'll use the money for booze or drugs. But I'm looking for work, and I'm hungry."
  - † Inside the argument raged: would it be helpful to give him money or would it just enable his addictions, if he does have them? Wouldn't it be better to give money to a local food pantry or soup kitchen?
  - † Sighing, unsure of the answer, one of us gave him some money. He received it joyfully and asked if he could sing for us. "That's okay," we said. "No, I'd really like to sing for you."
  - † And this is what he sang: "Shackled by a heavy burden, neath a load of guilt and shame, then the hand of Jesus touched me, and now I am no longer the same. He touched me, O he touched me, and O the joy that floods my soul! Something happened, and now I know, he touched me and made me whole."
  - † Sentimental? Maybe. But sometimes we need to practice a ministry of presence. And yet that is not enough. We also need to work for the end to the causes of physical and social sickness.
  - † In love for those who suffer, and in anger at the causes of their suffering, we are called to a ministry of healing in the manner of Jesus. He calls us as individuals, as a church, as a nation to become healers of souls and bodies and systems.
  - † By the power of the Holy Spirit, may we follow him. Amen.

Sources:

*The Wesley Study Bible*, Abingdon Press, 2009.

Leonard Sweet, “I’m a Leper, You’re a Leper,” [www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com)

Sarah Dylan, [www.sarahlaughed.org](http://www.sarahlaughed.org)