

Living The Spirit Of The Law
Mark 1:40-50
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Last Sunday I encouraged you to read all of Mark's gospel so you know the whole story of Jesus with all its glorious implications.

I also encouraged you to think of the gospels as you would any other good story, having a definite beginning, middle and end, with twists and turns in the plotline along with recurring themes. Otherwise, the random, isolated stories you hear read from the pulpit on Sunday mornings can't speak to you in all their fullness and power.

Here's what I mean: Today's story, isolated from the rest of Mark's gospel, could be used as a justification for circus atmosphere of those faith healers' T.V. shows. Some poor soul limps forward, states her problem, then wham! She's jumping up and down praising God! I'm not claiming it's fakery. I believe in miracles, but in this venue, the act of healing becomes the main event, while the complete gospel of Jesus Christ gets lost in the sensationalism.

So, to gain a deeper appreciation for the story of Jesus healing the leper, let's begin by reviewing the five verses of this morning's lesson.

A leper came to Jesus begging him and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose you can make me clean." Moved with pity Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him and said, "I do choose, be made clean." (Mark 1:40-41)

It seems simple and straightforward enough. The leper aware of Jesus' growing reputation, seeks him out and gets healed.

Now, remember this healing took place just as Jesus' ministry was getting off the ground. Mark reports Jesus spent most of his days teaching and healing, but it's his healings and exorcisms that got most of the press and got him pegged for being primarily a faith healer.

However, as Mark's telling of the story unfolds Jesus proved he's much more than that, and if you pay close attention you realize Mark, like any good storyteller, slowly uncovers random hints of Jesus' broadening agenda.

You find one of these hints in the way Jesus responded to the leper. Mark writes, "Jesus was moved with pity." But if you look at the footnotes at the bottom of the page in the Revised Standard Version (our "pew" Bible) you see the notation, "Other ancient authorities read anger instead of pity." Jesus was moved to anger instead of pity? What's that all about?

Last week I said one of the recurring themes in the gospels is Jesus consistently challenging the authority of the religious leaders who insisted on legalistic interpretations of The Law of Moses and enforced conformity with their weapon of choice, excommunication.

The priests and Pharisees claimed their authority to excommunicate lepers came from the codes found in the Book of Leviticus. The 13th chapter lays down the law: lepers not only had to live by themselves, out in the wilderness, they were also expected

to draw attention to their disease by wearing torn rags, not combing their hair and crying out “Unclean, unclean!” when anyone approached them.

Since leprosy was believed to be highly contagious, these restrictions could be justified, to a point. Even today, patients with virulent infections are quarantined to protect the general population. But here’s where the enforcement of these laws became problematic. Since Leviticus made no specific provisions obligating the greater community to minister to lepers, the religious authorities never did and justified their absence of compassion by self-righteously using the scriptures to absolve themselves from any responsibility and then claim they were following the letter of the law.

Jesus however, advocated going beyond the letter of the law to living within the spirit of the law, “...to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

Since it’s safer following the letter of the law the Pharisees conveniently forgot, even though Leviticus was silent on the topic of compassion for lepers, there were ample instructions elsewhere in the law mandating kindness and mercy and loving your neighbor as yourself.

It’s this law of love that compelled Jesus to physically touch that leper, but by committing this act of kindness Jesus technically broke the law, rendered himself ritually unclean, and risked his own physical health. Jesus’ love for the man cancelled out his fear of leprosy, earning him the right to say to us “...deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me,” because he was already doing it.

Having said all this, let’s revisit the balance of this morning’s text. After Jesus said, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Mark continued,

Immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean. After sternly warning him, he sent him away at once saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them.” (Mark 1:42-44)

Something curious happens here. Very sternly Jesus commanded him to tell no one how he was cured. His reluctance to publicize this healing makes me think again of those faith healers on T.V. who sensationalize their healings. Instead Jesus was all about servanthood and self-denial not celebrity and self-promotion. He didn’t want fans and admirers; he wanted followers who realized miraculous healings can’t be divorced from the calling to ethical, compassionate living.

But there’s something else: Jesus’ desire to keep his identity a secret is another one of those recurring themes in Mark’s gospel.

Remember the earlier story about Jesus casting out the demon in the synagogue? When the demons recognized Jesus, they called out, “What have you to do with us...Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!” At that point Jesus commanded, “Shut up!” Our RSV translation puts it more politely, “But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent and come out of him!’” (Mark 1:24-25) But he really said, “Shut up.”

Jesus didn’t want the demons to blow his cover; he didn’t want people to know He is the Christ. Not yet. Not until his trial, under cross examination, would Jesus finally reveal himself to be the Son of God.

Why did Jesus keep this secret? Because Jesus wanted time to shift the people’s nationalistic expectations to his own. He wasn’t going to be the triumphant Christ the

people wanted. He would be the suffering Christ the people needed. The popular conception was the Messiah would be a powerful political and military leader who'd replace Rome with Jerusalem as the new capital of the world.

Carefully reading the gospel however, reveals this was absolutely not Jesus' intention. Sayings like "my kingdom is not of this world" and "the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" tells us Jesus' calling was really all about coming into our world, entering our lives, and ultimately our suffering. Jesus wasn't seeking fame and power. That's why Jesus sternly told the leper to tell no one, but Mark reports:

"The man...started talking about it freely...so Jesus...had to stay outside in places where nobody lived. Even so, people from all around would come to him." (Mark 1:45)

Ironic, isn't it? The leper could now return to his own home, but Jesus was now forced to stay outside, like a leper, in places where nobody lived. Hopefully today's sermon gives you insights into Mark's gospel that helps you understand Jesus' motivations for his ministry. But I also hope we understand Jesus' anger, sparked by the injustice and cruelty of his society, should spark our own anger whenever fear and prejudice dehumanizes and marginalizes the latter day lepers of our society.

These latter day lepers are everywhere, and if we take Jesus seriously, we have no choice but, ...to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God," whenever they cross our path.

I've said before, we're not expected to save the world, that's God's job. But we can do our part as individuals and a faith community to be compassionate and helpful. That's our job, so let's do it.