

## 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

(Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

II Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Mark 1:40-45; I Corinthians 9:24-27

**Mark 1:40-45** is the story of the request of a leper to Jesus, “If you chose, you can make me clean”, Jesus’ response, “I do choose. Be made clean”, and the consequent healing of the man. But, in reality, it is much, much more than that.

The depth of this story is not discernible unless one first appreciates the religious restrictions under which Israel was functioning at that time. Leviticus 13-14 presents the Mosaic requirements regarding the way Hebrew society was to deal with leprosy. “Leprosy” was not only what is today known as Hansen’s disease (a chronic skin disease characterized by the formation of nodules that spread across the surface of the body resulting in loss of sensation and eventual paralysis). It included any skin disease (such as psoriasis) that was thought to be infectious and eventually debilitating. The Levitical law called for those believed to have “leprosy” to be ostracized from society, to announce their presence by shouting, “Unclean, unclean” so that people might avoid them, and to not be allowed to participate in any of the religious rituals of community life. It would be the priesthood who would examine a person suspected of leprosy and would make the declaration that would ostracize that person. And it would be the priesthood that would examine that person if he/she believed they had been cleansed; the priesthood would determine whether or not that person would be declared “clean” and be allowed to return to full participation in community life. Thus, it was the priestly system of Israel that would determine whether people would be ostracized from or restored to Israelite society.

Therefore, what this story is about is the request of a leper to be healed by Jesus, and Jesus’ making of that healing into a public action against the priestly system of his day.

The story begins with a leper approaching Jesus and saying to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean” (1:40). Jesus responds to this leper’s plea by being “moved with pity”, by “touching him” and by saying, “I do choose. Be made clean” (1:41)! Then Mark reports, “Immediately the leper left him, and he was made clean” (1:42).

There are several important points Mark makes in this telling of the story that if we do not pay attention to them, will rob us of understanding Mark’s intent in repeating this story. First, Mark tells us that Jesus was “moved with pity”. The word “pity” is a bad translation of the Greek word used here (*embrimesamenos*). It literally means, “snorting in indignation”. Several older manuscripts actually read, “moved with anger” (which is what “snorting in indignation” means), and since that is the more difficult reading, it is likely the original reading.

What Mark is communicating here is how Jesus responds to this man and the dilemma with which he has to cope. The temptation of translators to use the word “pity” (i.e., sympathetic sorrow) actually robs the passage of the power of Mark’s words, which is that Jesus was *angry* at the way this man was being treated. He “snorted in indignation”! Jesus was angry at a priestly system so arrayed that it would deny a man his rightful place in society, ostracizing him from

family, friends, loved ones and participation in all that makes human life rich. Jesus was angry, not full of pity!

Second, Jesus touches the man. By touching him, Jesus has made himself ritualistically unclean under the Law. The man asks to be made clean. But Jesus goes further to touch him and thus take that man's uncleanness upon himself. In his anger, Jesus identifies with the ostracism and rejection from normal human society that is this man's lot in life. He takes on that ostracism and rejection! But, as Mark will show in just a few sentences, rather than Jesus being infected by this man, Jesus' touch *heals* the man of his leprosy! Thus, by touching the man and then healing him, Jesus puts the lie to the priestly system that would ostracize such people by teaching that they were "unclean".

Third, there is, in this passage, an intriguing play on words. The man begs, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus responds, "I do choose. Be made clean". And then Mark tells us, "he was made clean". The task is to make the man clean of his leprosy, and thus set free to join human society again. The man places the demand before Jesus for his healing by stating the demand as a decision Jesus must make. "If you choose" implies that this man believes that it is self-evident that Jesus *can* heal him. The only question is whether Jesus *will choose* to heal him! Thus, by stating his demand as "If you choose", this man is actually saying, "If you will do this healing".

Jesus, though, changes the meaning. Of course, he would heal the man, because Jesus is a man of compassion who doesn't abide human suffering (in fact, it makes him angry when he sees people suffering needlessly because of the arbitrary decisions of a system like the priestly class that only wants to maintain its power and authority over the people). Thus, when Jesus responds "I do choose" and then touches the man, Mark makes it clear that, in his anger against human-destroying systems, Jesus means "I become one with you in your being ostracized, and I choose to enter into your condition in order to free you of that condition". Then Jesus speaks the word, "Be made clean", touches him, and the man is cleansed, thus successfully confronting the priestly system.

Jesus then "sternly warns him" and instructs the man, "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 him" (1:43-44). This passage is traditionally interpreted as an endorsement by Jesus of the priestly function in administering the health codes (regulations against heresy) of the nation. But it is not. It is the exact opposite – and the text makes that perfectly clear.

First, it tells us that Jesus "sternly warned" the man. The Greek verb used here expresses deep emotion on the part of Jesus (e.g., it is used in John 11:33, 38 for Jesus' response at Lazarus' tomb). Jesus' instruction to this man is not a casual request, but a deeply emotional, highly convictional demand; Jesus is virtually "shaking" him, in essence saying, "You *must* take these next steps if this healing is to have its desired impact upon the priestly system!"

Second, when Jesus instructs the man to appear before the priests for confirmation of his healing, the Greek word that Mark uses is not best translated "go" but "go back". The man was to "go back" to the priests. That is, the man had already been to the priests (required by Leviticus) who

had pronounced him unclean, and by that pronouncement, had made him a second-class citizen. He had sought to be freed from their condemnation of leprosy that had ostracized him from his family and from all Hebrew society. And they had, in the past, refused to free him. So now he was to “go back” and confront them with the reality of his healing.

Third, Jesus states that the reason the man must say nothing to anyone but go back and confront the priests was “as a testimony to them”. Whatever does that mean? The phrase can be more accurately translated, “as a witness against them”. The man was to “go back” to the priests who had condemned him to exile, was to show them his clean flesh, and thus was to be, in his very person, a witness against them of their arbitrary and oppressive use of their power to disinvest peasants like himself. In essence, Jesus wanted this man to “stick it” to the priests – shoving the former marks of his “uncleanness” in their faces so that they would have to acknowledge he was healed and would have to declare him “clean”. Jesus wanted the man to confront the priests with the reality of what they had done to him!

But the man doesn’t obey Jesus. He doesn’t bring the issue to the confrontation to which it needs to be brought. Instead, “he went out and began to proclaim (his healing) freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter” (1:45).

The man, healed of his leprosy, is not healed of his fear and intimidation. He doesn’t do what needs to be done – to hold the priestly system accountable for destroying lives like his, and by their arbitrary decisions turning people into ostracized, second-class citizens. Instead, he goes to the people, declaring to them what Jesus had done for him. And the result of his disobedience to Jesus’ “stern charge” is that he doesn’t call the priestly system to accountability. Rather, he makes ministry much harder for Jesus, in that people enthusiastically respond to Jesus while seeking healing for themselves and depriving Jesus of the time that he needs to build his power base and his effort to get Israel’s systems to repent and to return to the Jubilee society God intended for all of them.<sup>1</sup>

**II Kings 5:1-14** is the well-known Old Testament story of the healing of Naaman from his leprosy. Although this story is significantly different from the story of Jesus’ healing of the leper, it has some remarkable thematic parallels to the Gospel lesson for today.

The nation of Aram (Syria), Israel’s neighbor state on their northern border, had recently been to war against Israel (I Kings 22:1-40). Israel had failed badly in that war, including the loss of their king, Ahab. Aram’s supreme commander was Naaman, “a great man and in high favor with his master”, the king of Aram (5:1). But although he was of high status in Aram, Naaman had one blight upon this life. He had leprosy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark develops this theme of the “Messianic Secret” (cf. 1:34, 43; 3:12; 4:10, 11; 5:19; 8:30; 9:9) throughout his book. The “Messianic Secret” keeps Jesus’ work secret until the base can be built and the time become right for revealing to Israel who Jesus is and what he has come to do.

<sup>2</sup> Likely not Hansen’s disease, but a form of psoriasis; this can be determined by the fact that he was not ostracized either from the king’s court nor from daily life, nor from the court of Israel’s king, Jehoram. Consequently, he must have been perceived as non-infectious.

One of Naaman's servant girls, an Israelite captive taken in one of Aram's raids on Israelite territory, tells her mistress of a prophet back in Israel who could heal people (Elisha the Tishbite). Naaman's wife tells Naaman of the prophet, and he receives the permission of his king to go to Israel to seek healing. Naaman goes to the court of Jehoram, king of Israel who sends him to Elisah, who then heals Naaman of his disease. That is the story, but it is in its particulars where the intrigue lies!

The story of the healing of Naaman is not simply a story about the healing of an individual, or even of a Gentile. It is a story about the political, economic and religious systems of two nations and of the way God works to expose the powerlessness of these systems through the faithful exercise of the power at their disposal of ordinary people who are open to God's leading.

There are two groups of players in the story. There are those who are acknowledged by human standards as having considerable power: Naaman, his wife, the king of Aram and the king of Israel. Then there are those who have little or no apparent power: the captive girl, Elisha and the servants of Naaman.

Naaman may be a very powerful commander of Aram's army. But his leprosy marks him as a man with a great vulnerability, as well. It is the captive girl who is sensitive to that vulnerability and shares with her mistress, Naaman's wife, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy" (5:3). That captive girl could have withheld this information about Elisha. After all, she had been captured in a Syrian raid led by Naaman; she had been torn from her family, her home and all that she held dear. She was now living as a slave in Naaman's household. But rather than be captured by bitterness, she allowed herself to feel compassion toward Naaman and to share the news that could free him.

Naaman secures the permission of the king of Aram to find this prophet and to receive healing from him. Thinking that Elisha was a court prophet for the Israelite king, the Aramean king sent Naaman to the king of Israel with an enormous gift of silver and gold (a customary gift to a king from whom you are requesting a favor). Jehoram, the king of Israel, hears Naaman's impossible request to him to heal the commander of his leprosy. He immediately concludes, therefore, that this is a ruse by Aram to provide the pretext for war, and he is understandably alarmed. When matters are left to those who operate the political and economic systems of the world, they will always think in domination terms, seeking to perceive their advantage in every incident and always acting to preserve their power and to control those who come with a petition.

It is Elisah, and not Naaman nor Jehoram, who breaks the stalemate. The prophet inserts himself into the struggle by sending a message to Israel's king, "Why have you torn your clothes (that is, why have you reacted in such a dominating way)? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel" (5:8). So Naaman makes the journey to Elisha's house, arriving with a full display of his power (5:9). Elisha is unimpressed. He doesn't even go out to speak to Naaman, but rather sends him a message as to what to do to be cleansed. In essence, Elisha puts Naaman in his place, indicating that in the final analysis – at least before God and God's prophet – he is nothing more than a supplicant with an apparently-insurmountable problem, and that his rank and position mean nothing. It is an amazing leveling action on Elisha's part.

Elisha's instructions to Naaman are to wash seven times in the Jordan, and he will be healed (5:10). Naaman takes umbrage at that command. He expected something more than being left waiting outside the prophet's door and then being given instructions simply to go wash in the river. He expected considerably more attention than this and actions to accomplish healing that would be far more dramatic. His dignity as a great commander is affronted, and he is ready to call off his effort to be healed.

Then another powerless group intervenes. Naaman's servants come and talk sense to him. "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" (5:13) The servants confrontation of Naaman has its desired effect. He listens to them, realizes that he is allowing himself to be supersensitive and controlling, and takes his pride into hand. He washes seven times<sup>3</sup> in the Jordan River, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean" (5:14).

When one examines this story, one can quickly see that it is not the powerful, wealthy or dominant (Naaman, his wife, the two kings) who are the heroes, but rather the weak (the captive girl), the powerless (the servants), the obedient (the prophet). Authentic power is not found in the political or economic systems of a nation, because that power will always seek to serve and to protect itself – even at the expense of the people. The only kind of power that will truly transform will be an enslaved girl's kindness, a prophet's refusal to be intimidated or impressed, and the wisdom and candor of the servants.

The primary parallel between this story and the Gospel lesson (besides the fact that they both deal with the healing of a leper) is that to be faithful to God and the Gospel, one has to be willing to stand up to the Principalities and Powers – whether they are the priestly powers of Jesus' day or whether they be the kings of Israel and Aram, and Aram's supreme military commander. God's people must speak the truth to the systems, expose the lies by which they operate (and which the systems often believe themselves), and call them to recognize their failures, their exploitation of people or of the situation, and to repent. Only a relational power between the people – whether they be a Jewish wonder-worker and a leper, or a captive girl, servants and a prophet – that calls to accountability, that refuses to accept the charades of the powerful, that calls for repentance and that seeks to do good for others can heal not just a commander but the world.

**Psalm 30** is apparently occasioned by the recovery of the Psalmist from a grave illness. The Psalmist centers on the praise of God for rescuing him from that sickness. It is a psalm with several well-known lines and metaphors.

"Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (30:4-5).

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<sup>3</sup> The number seven is used as a symbol of perfection in the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, Elisha's instruction to Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan symbolizes the perfecting or healing of Naaman's body.

Or again,

“You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever” (vss. 11-12).

These are popular and very vivid phrases. But behind their drama lies a very profound truth – that God is at work in our lives and in our circumstances, and acts in ways that can bring triumph out of defeat, joy out of bitterness, health out of sickness. It is important that we perceive that such healing and deliverance is the action of God, and not just circumstance.

**I Corinthians 9:24-27** is Paul’s famous metaphor of the necessity for Christians to run the race of life, recognizing that in order to win, they must be passionate about training.

Each one of us is called to run a particular race for Christ and His Kingdom, Paul is suggesting in this scripture. Each one of us is called to fight a particular fight (9:24, 26). We must “keep our eye on the prize”, and the only legitimate prize for us who call ourselves Christians, Paul would suggest, would be working for the coming of the Kingdom of God within the kingdoms of this world (including, for Paul, Rome).

But how do we “keep our eyes on the prize”? What does it take to win the race in which each of us is involved (vs. 24b)? To be effective in the ministry to which each of us is called requires us to hone our capacity, our ability and our willingness to win – and that, in turn, requires training (vss. 25-27).

We have to be willing to build our capacity – to learn how to be in the right place at the right time (like Naaman’s captive girl) and to take advantage of the opportunities that offer themselves to us (like Naaman’s servants). It means gaining real clarity on the mission toward which we are called and, consequently, to what we are not called (like Elisha and Jesus and Paul). It means that we have to hone our skills in confronting and negotiating with the leaders of the systems of the world (again, like Jesus or Paul or Elisha). But above all, it means being willing to get engaged even when it causes us extreme discomfort (unlike the former leper who, rather than confronting the priests, took the easy way out by sharing with the people how Jesus healed him and thereby significantly complicating and compromising Jesus’ mission). We are only as effective for Christ and His Kingdom as we prepare and train ourselves and risk being engaged in public life.

Therefore, following Paul’s lead, “I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified” (9:26-27). In other words, when working for the Kingdom of God, no less than in working out in sports, “where there is no pain; there is no gain”!

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