

May 15, 2016

BE CLEAN !!!

Matthew 8:1-4

Imagine someone shut up in a closed room, idolizing the glow of several lamps, rejoicing in their wonderful light. And imagine that you wished to make them truly happy. You would begin by blowing out all the lamps, and then you'd throw open the shutters to let in the sun's light!

Jesus didn't come just to offer hope, but to fulfill hope. He didn't come just to tell the good news. He came to do it. And He didn't come just to make people think better, but to make them feel better, and, to live better. And our purpose, as His Body, the Church, is to be Christ to the world, to do more than just tell others about the light, but to be the light.

Being in mission is like letting our lights shine! Mission is faith reaching beyond its grasp. When a leper came to Jesus, Jesus touched him! Note that someone with leprosy was not only unclean, they were untouchable. The man was not only sick, he was hideously gross. Leprosy is not only a disease that shows up on the skin, it literally caused the skin to rot in such a way that the body of a leper can look like it is decomposing while it is still alive! A leper was, by custom, supposed to keep his or her distance. In fact, in order to be sure people stayed away from them, they were to cry, "Unclean!" should people even begin to approach. Notice how the leper's request in this passage of Scripture is to be made *clean*. He would be healed if he could just be made clean!

And who was it, in those days, who regulated and oversaw the issues of clean and unclean? The Pharisees and priests! Jesus wants the man, suddenly clean from his leprosy, to become a testimony before *them*. Why? Because, for one, they could technically affirm the man's acceptability back into common society. But also because they could then, likewise, affirm Jesus as the healer He was. So far, in Matthew, Jesus has never been rejected by the official leaders of the faith. In Luke, however, Jesus had been rejected in Nazareth after He had proclaimed in the synagogue there: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" (Luke 4:18-19) But that message sort of concluded with the people wanting to hurl Jesus over a cliff. It is not unlikely that the news of this had spread as much as His fame as a great healer. (see Matthew 4:23-24) And like anyone who would want to defend their positive reputation, Jesus may very well have wanted the religious authorities to be forced into affirming both legally and officially that He was acceptable as a healer, and, by extension, as the One He would proclaim Himself to be. (In Matthew, He has not testified to His being the Son of God... yet).

Whether or not the man ever went to the priests, Jesus' fame was magnified by what He did for the leper. And now, Christ has attracted great crowds. But... Jesus didn't want fame, He wanted faith. So... He led by example by withdrawing from the mainstream of life in order to pray. Remember how He was against praying in public: "*Beware of practicing your piety before others...*" (Matthew 6:1) So He found time and space for solitary prayer.

I think however, the greatest relevance of this story comes in the simple reality of the words: "*He stretched out His hand and touched him...*" This is more important than the courage and devotion expressed by the leper, though that is in fact, very relevant. The touch! The touch is what is so important. Jesus reached far beyond the grasp of His culture and custom by that simple touch. And so do we, by our efforts in mission.

Mission is faith exceeding its grasp. When we stop a moment and reflect on all the ways we touch others, it's inspiring. No, we may not touch them literally, but think of how many people will be touched by the mission projects we support and enable, by the mission work that is done by people from our congregation, and by the prayers we offer for missionaries and missionary work. There are

people we are reaching, and, I believe they feel our touch. We may not know the people we touch, but we do know that their needs inspire us to respond, to reach out.

We may not know the victims of sexual assault, or, the women who are helped through the Lamb's Fold ministry in Joliet, but we can become acquainted with some of the people who work with and touch them personally. The connections we make may sometimes be as slim as a single thread, but they make a real difference. Through our Apportionments and other mission dollars, victims of earthquakes, fires, floods, tornadoes, and wars are helped, especially through the United Methodist Committee on Relief, and, all our gifts we give when our hearts are tweaked. There are children who are touched through our support of Marcy-Newberry's ministries. Believe it or not, we touch them. They may not be one of us, but we come to them. *"If you would choose,"* the leper said.

We may never be thanked by all the people we help, but we can thank God that we can be helpers. We may feel no immediate reward for the good we do beyond us here, but we can rejoice that we have done so much good! You see, when it comes to mission, it is not about us. It is about them, the people who receive some benefit of our generosity. And we don't do it because of who they are, necessarily, but because they have a need, and we know that need. And we don't do it only because we can identify with that need somehow, though that can be quite a motivator. We do it because of who we are. And we are the Body of Christ. We are the hands of Christ reaching. We are the eyes of Christ seeing the need. We are the heart of Jesus who has compassion on all who need His love, His touch.

The healing, comforting, loving, compassionate, hopeful, saving grace that works in us also works *through* us. And it can only work through us, not because of who we are, but because of who Jesus is. And He reached out. He touched. He healed. He saved....you and me!