

“Healing Presence”

Reverend Kathy Pickett
Holmeswood Baptist Church, Kansas City MO
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Mark 1:40-45
February 12, 2012

A few weeks ago I was sitting at the table with a group of folks eating pizza. We were celebrating all the work a little band of volunteers had completed around the Holmeswood property. I happened to be the only female at the table and wondered if I was in trouble when one of the guys leaned in and asked, “Can I ask you a personal question?” The question was much better than I had feared and led to a lively discussion about prayer, hands on healing, and what we believed about it all.

Mark’s gospel is determined to prove the identity of Jesus as God’s son through the numerous stories of Jesus hands on healing and new authority. Leading up to today’s text Jesus has exorcized unclean spirits, healed Simon’s mother-in-law, healed and tossed out demons “in the whole city”, and cured the many diseases of the sick. Exhausted and in need of restoration himself, Jesus heads to a deserted place to pray. He doesn’t get to stay there long. The frantic disciples find Jesus, telling him that everyone is looking for him, and they head out to the neighboring towns where Jesus continues his ministry of teaching and healing.

It’s interesting, all these demons and unclean spirits seem to know Jesus, identifying him as the Holy One of God. They even obey his authority, but everyone else seems to be clueless and wondering.

While out and about, a leper came to Jesus and begged Jesus to heal him. The leper, desperate, and yet really courageous, risking his life to get out and in front of Jesus, gets on his knees and says, “If you choose you can make me clean.”

Leprosy is a skin disease that left untreated, can be progressive, causing permanent damage to the skin, nerves, limbs and eyes. It’s been around for approximately 4000 years, and still found today in 130 countries and territories reporting 192, 246 cases of the disease. What makes this a bigger deal, leprosy can be treated today, but many who are affected are still ostracized and fear coming out in community.

Leprosy understood the way Jesus and the disciples understood it referred to a wide array of skin diseases. The Jewish law determined all who suffered from the disease unclean. Typically “lepers” were banished from society and outcasts of

their community. On his knees, seeing, knowing, and believing in Jesus' authority and ability, the leper pleads, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus, moved with pity, stretches out his hand, touches him, and says, "I do choose, be made clean!"

The pity Jesus shows is more than the sweet compassionate Jesus we see in Sunday school pictures. Pity in the Greek is often translated as anger, or maybe even better understood as compassionate outrage. In this moment Jesus is filled with compassion for this hurting outcast while outraged at the arrogance of the religious law and makes a statement by this public display of healing.

Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. Jesus warns him, quickly sending him away saying to the healed 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 them."

Well I don't know about you, but I think I would have done the exact same thing the healed, no longer leper, man did, "he went out and began to proclaim it 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.

Can you imagine the disciples and others who were gathered around? "Jesus, don't do it, don't touch him, and get back, unclean, unclean! He touched him, and we have to break bread with him tonight, isn't he unclean?"

What would we do? Would we, followers of Jesus, disciples on the journey, would we reach out and touch the leper?

Two really bold things happen: one, the leper believes in Jesus authority, recognizing the healing power of God, and risks his life to save his life. The second bold and risky move is Jesus touching the leper, becoming unclean himself by the religious rules and laws of his day. This touch not only heals but breaks through the boundaries of human law demonstrating the power of a new authority and teaching.

Throughout Mark's stories of healing and teaching several threads hold it all together. The first is courage and risk, out in public, with Jesus, with a leper. Two, recognizing that healing is a gift; we do not have to earn it. Three, God's love is not exclusive, rather inclusive without discrimination. Four, passion in the form of pity, anger, and compassion is necessary for ministry.

This story presents a real challenge for communities of faith today. It calls us to ask whom we may have placed outside of God's healing love. It challenges us to

ask how this act of touching the unclean, becoming unclean, might confront us or comfort us. As a Christian community of faith, we must ask, is our ministry focused on extending the unconditional love of Christ to everyone, even those we individually and corporately might consider unclean?

This text challenges us in yet another way. Have you noticed how no one can keep their mouths closed? Even though Jesus tells them to keep it quiet, they can't do it. They have to tell their stories of restoration, of healing through unconditional, inclusive love, of belonging to community again.

Since we are gathered together in this room today, included, welcomed, loved, I have to assume we have a story to tell. A story that is worth telling and offering to the hurting world around us, wherever we are and whoever we are with. We shouldn't keep it quiet. The story is contagious, exciting, comforting, a story worth telling. It's a story of what and why we are church, and how we are supposed to be and do church.

Who are the lepers, the unclean, and the outcast today? Here are some clues:
We will know them when we avoid them.
We will know them when we are afraid to touch them.
We will know them when we create boundaries to keep them out, we will know them when that little nagging feeling tells us we need to reach out and touch those we are trying to avoid, but go the other way instead.

Healing is most often found in love offered, relationships formed, humanity affirmed and nurtured. Healing this way is offered regardless of skin condition, sexual orientation, gender, social and economic status, religious practice, and regardless of physical and mental disease.

In response to the 'personal question' I believe in all the mysterious ways God continues to heal in this world, but also believe we must be careful about some of today's stories of hands-on healing and power filled prayer. Instead we need to focus on the message of this new authority and teaching found in the healing stories of Mark's gospel. This kind of healing takes risks; it's bold, courageous, unconditional and restorative. It breaks the chains of religious arrogance boundaries and oppression. It tells the story of belonging, inclusion, in public, community, in the pew seat, anywhere and everywhere we have the opportunity to touch societies outcast with Christ's transforming love. I believe this kind of healing.

