

Divine Healing

Mark 1: 40-45

Delivered: First Presbyterian Church of San Anselmo, CA

Last month when I was back home in Pittsburgh for Christmas, I was invited by my aunt to attend a worship service at a congregation which she has been recently attending. Attending my aunt's church was a good experience for me because not only did I get to see my aunt and her family, but as a Presbyterian, I got to worship in a style that is different than how I normally worship. In this particular case, I was worshipping in a non-denominational contemporary church setting.

But while I had been to contemporary, non-denominational worship services before and wasn't too surprised by some of the differences this church had from my Presbyterian traditions (especially their lack of liturgical robes, and printed church bulletins), I did have a problem when it came time to pass the peace. Because when I went to turn around and offered my firm, yet soft handshake to a woman who was sitting next to me, she looked at me with a puzzled look on her face as I stood there with my hand sticking out.

"A handshake?" she asked me as she grabbed me and started hugging me as if we were long lost friends who hadn't seen each other in years "What are you," she asked. "A Presbyterian?"

I don't know what exactly gave my secret away!

Our scripture today is all about the power of one's touch that goes well beyond a Presbyterian handshake. While Mark tells us a story about a man who is healed of leprosy with a simple touch, the truth is, it's a story that goes much deeper than a man being cured of a disease.

For most of us, leprosy is something that is not as common in today's world, at least in the United States. However, leprosy, which is often referred to today as Hansen's disease, still exists in many parts of the world. In essence, leprosy is a painful disease of the skin which causes a person to have lesions all over their self and if left untreated, leprosy can cause damage to skin, nerves, limbs and even damage to one's eyesight. But while having this disease was painful and caused disfigurement to one's skin, the social and psychological pains experienced by those who had leprosy was sometimes even worse than how one looked on the outside.

In Jesus's time, people were absolutely terrified of catching leprosy from others. So much so, that if you had leprosy yourself, you were forced to be exiled from your family and from being in public places. The reason behind a lot of the social stigma that existed towards those who had this disease came from Jewish law. If you look in Leviticus 13, not only were the Israelites told how to identify a person with leprosy, it also told the Israelites how to deal with a person if they also had the disease. To them, those who had leprosy were just not individuals who were sick, but they were considered individuals who were 'unclean.'

In fact, verse 45 reads, "As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn,

and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

For most of us, it's hard to imagine what it would be like to have such an illness. An illness that not only brought you a lot of physical pain but an illness that made you physically disfigured causing people to fear you and a law that required you to be exiled from your family and friends. But while our society has come far in the past 2,000 years in how we treat others who are suffering, the reality still exists that we still have a longer way to go.

When I was served in AmeriCorps as an undergraduate in college, I once was asked to lead a group of college students including myself to Atlanta, Georgia to work with the city's homeless and AIDS population during our spring break. While I had led projects before, this project happened to be more difficult because while we had a great number of college students who wanted to spend the week doing volunteer work, we did not have a lot of students interested in going to Atlanta with us. And the truth is, I could understand why. Because despite the education we have today and all the campaigns to educate individuals about the issues of AIDS and homelessness, there were still a lot of stereotypes and fears people had of those who suffering from both of these.

Despite only having a small group of six students, the time we spent working with a small faith-based non-profit agency in Atlanta called the AIDS Interfaith Network, not only helped ourselves see beyond the social stereotypes we had of those living with HIV and AIDS, but it also put a human face and a human touch on those who are living with this disease.

One such moment happened when the six of us were eating lunch at the agency with a group of men who happened to be living with HIV. One of the men, a gentleman named James, took a moment to talk about his life and how being not only homeless but being HIV positive, changed how people treated him.

"People have a lot of fear of us who have this disease," he said. "And while people have compassion for what you are going through, I can still sense the fear they have of me. Fear they have that is so strong, they simply aren't able to reach out and shake my hand when they greet me."

The man on the street corner struggling with homelessness in San Francisco. The woman next door who has a physical disability. The man in San Quieten who is incarcerated for life. The orphan child in Kenya who is living with AIDS and hasn't been able to find a loving home. The mother of four who is in rehab for the second time, trying to overcome her addiction to drugs. These are the ones, who just like the man with leprosy 2,000 years ago, are ignored, forgotten, and alienated by our society.

And while we teach our children to have compassion for those who are struggling with these things, the reality exists that we ourselves are the ones who have this sense of fear and lack of understanding of the suffering that others experience.

It has been said before that one of the most powerful ways of sharing our love with one another is simply through the human touch. Whether it be through a hug, a pat on the

shoulder, or even a Presbyterian handshake, we not only are able to send a message of comfort, but we are able to send a message of compassion merely by touching others.

The Rev. Dr. James Moiso, a retired Presbyterian pastor, and mentor of mine, once told me a story about the power of the human touch which he learned about while serving in a congregation in Oregon. He said that for many years, it was accustom for his congregation to form a circle and hold hands after the benediction to pray. However, while this was a tradition in this particular congregation, he and the worship committee decided they were going to no longer do this tradition. However, one day a congregant, an older woman who was a widow and lived alone, found out about this possible change in the service and asked to speak with Rev. Moiso privately. In essence, she told him, "holding hands with people in the worship service is the only opportunity I have all week to have someone touch me," she said.

For this woman, the suffering she experienced was the suffering of loneliness. And for her, that touch of someone's hand every Sunday was a sense of healing for the pain which she must have felt.

In the book entitled "Lament for a Son" theologian and writer Nicholas Wolsteroff reflects through various writings his grieving process after the death of his 25-year-old son who died during a rock climbing accident. And during the series of reflections which captures his anger, pain, and his terrible sadness, he comes to the conclusion that not only was God with his son as he fell down that mountain but that God shared in his suffering as he grieved the loss of his son. Especially since God I also knew what it felt like to lose a child.

Wolsteroff writes:

"God is not the God of the suffers, but the God who suffers. The pain and fallness of humanity have entered into God's heart. Through the prism of my tears, I have seen a suffering God."

While the story of Jesus curing a man of leprosy seeks to teach us about the power of God and Jesus's compassion on this man with the disease, the truth is, this story can be difficult for many of us.

Not because the story is difficult to understand or is written in a context we can't relate to in today's society. But because like the man with leprosy, we too know what it's like to desperately be seeking a cure for our suffering.

However, while all of us continue to find ourselves 'in the waiting' for a cure to the suffering we face in our lives, we also see an image of Jesus reaching out and touching this man in this story. And it's through this image of Jesus that we see Jesus not only feeling this man's suffering, but we see Jesus sharing his suffering. And it's through that shared suffering that we see a healing presence brought into this man's life.

Recently, a friend told me a story about growing up in a small rural Methodist congregation in her hometown and going to a weekly youth church club as a child. While looking back, she doesn't have too many memories other than watching puppet shows, making crafts, and playing games with the other children, she said that her favorite part of the youth church club was when the pastor, a young woman they called Pastor Mary, would read bible stories to them while they ate their snacks. And even though the children would be so

full of energy especially after eating so many sugary snacks, she recalled how Pastor Mary was never worn out and always had energy to embrace the children which she deeply loved.

However, as the weeks went by, the children started to see Pastor Mary less and less.

Eventually, the children learned that Pastor Mary was sick and needed their prayers. However, that is when the children, on their own, decided to go a little further. Finding a long roll of white paper, they dipped their hands in different colors of paint and placed them on this paper creating a banner with all their hand prints on it with their names listed underneath. The banner, which the church hung in its hallway read, "All Hands on You Pastor Mary."

To this day my friend recalls the excitement the children had when Pastor Mary showed up to their youth church club to surprise the children. She also recalls how touched Pastor Mary was when she saw that banner with all the children's hand prints on it. While this would be the last time my friend ever saw her pastor, she knew deep in her heart that Pastor Mary knew how much those hand prints of the children meant to her and how it was a healing touch in her life amidst her suffering. And even though the children may not have known how sick Pastor Mary was or what she was going through, Pastor Mary knew that she wasn't going through her sickness alone.

The healing touch that comes from the hand of a friend as a man waits for the results of an important medical test. The healing touch that comes from that colleague at work who takes a moment and listens to a co-worker talk about her troubled marriage. The healing touch of the one who prays with a stranger. The healing touch of a warm smile of a woman that offers warm soup during a homeless shelter. The healing touch of holding hands with that person next to you during a prayer service. Even in the world which there is so much suffering, God is finding a way to bring healing into our lives.

Even just a few months I have been your intern, I have truly seen how the people in this church have reached out to those in need of a healing. From reaching out to those who are dealing with homelessness in Marin County and come to your church every week for food and shelter. To those you reach out to in your congregation dealing with health issues and personal struggles as you provide personal visits, phone calls, and prayer shawls, to reaching out through your support of social justice issues which aim to help those who are seeking to end oppression and discrimination, like Jesus, you are sharing the struggle of others. And it's through this shared struggle you have with others, that God is working through you to bringing healing to those in need.

And while all of us will continue to be 'in the waiting' for the day that we do find a cure to our suffering, God wants us to know that until this day comes, you need to know are not alone for God shares with us in our suffering. And it's through the hands of those filled with warmth and compassion, that we are able to share our sense of suffering, as God brings us a healing touch in our lives during our wait for the cure.

Whoever you are, where ever your story begins, or whatever you are going through that no one else may be able to see or understand, know this; our God hasn't forgotten you. Our God hasn't stopped loving you. And no matter what long the walk for you may be, our God will be there with you every step of the way, even until the very end of the age. This my friends are the healing presence of our God.

Bibliography

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