

“Love to the Lepers”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
February 12, 2006
Scripture: Mark 1:40-45

Let us begin with prayer.

As we reflect on this passage and on our lives, startle us again with your expansive love. And may the words of my mouth, and the thoughts and fears of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, for you, O God, are our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

I used to love Valentine’s Day when I was a young kid. I was never very artistic, but this was a holiday even I could appreciate. We would bring a shoebox to school, and spend part of our art time cutting out hearts and pasting them onto this box transforming it into a valentine mailbox. And then we would all bring a whole packet of those simple Valentine cards – you know – the ones you separated and carefully wrote in a “to” and “from” and were filled with cartoon characters like Scooby Doo saying things like, “Scooby Dooby Doo says I love you!” We would make sure that we carefully put a card in each classmate’s valentine mailbox. But then, something changed.

How quickly Valentine’s Day shifted from being an egalitarian art class project into an annual display of crushes and cliques and clusters. Instead of a fun occasion for all, Valentines Day became the day that the boundaries between who was popular and who was not were visible to any who looked around the room. Those who were in from those who were out. Clearcut social Darwinism. On Valentine’s Day the strong got stronger, with much positive admiration, and the weak got weaker, as self-esteem dropped with each passing February 14th. Even before the movie *Mean Girls* and the rise of a whole genre of parenting books like Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence¹ those who know kids know that they can at times be incredibly nice to others but at other times be incredibly mean.

This tendency to create systems where some are popular and others are left out is found not only in elementary school classrooms, of course. The caste system in India. Apartheid in South Africa. Slavery and Jim Crow in America. Socially condoned, even legally and religiously justified prejudices codified into laws that made it clear to everyone who is in and who is out. Who is socially desirable, and who is not.

First century Palestine’s had just such a purity system. Scholar Marcus Borg describes it in his bestseller, Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time:

The purity system established a spectrum of people ranging from the pure through varying degrees of purity to people on the margin to the radically impure. One’s purity

status depended to some extent on birth [status]. . . One's degree of purity or impurity also depended on behavior. Those who were carefully observant of the purity codes were "the pure," of course. The worst of the nonobservant were "outcasts." . . . "The righteous" were those who followed the purity system, and "sinners" were those who did not. Physical wholeness was associated with purity, and lack of wholeness with impurity. People who were not "whole" – the maimed, the chronically ill, lepers, eunuchs, and so forth – were on the impure side of the spectrum.

To sum up, [Borg writes,] the effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.²

In a real deep way, it makes sense doesn't it? The first rule of parenting teenagers is to get to know who their friends are. It is assumed to be good parenting to care about whom your child befriends – with the operating assumption we can get contaminated by contagious diseases not limited to colds and the flu but extending to drugs and alcohol and stds and poor decision-making. Be careful with whom you associate, parents warn – you can never be too careful. Don't ever associate with someone who could, just maybe, contaminate you.

The same was true for these purity laws. In this case, the purity laws took on a religious element. Cleanliness was next to Godliness – literally. Physical illness was assumed to be symptomatic of deeper sins. Those who were pure could attend religious observations, those who were unclean had to make a special offering to priests who could certify that they had been ritually cleansed and suitable to participate in the religious rituals of the community again. They had great power, the priests. They alone could deem someone formerly unclean religiously acceptable. Those who were physically ailing were subjected to a double punishment: not only were they second-class citizens, but they had to make a special payment as well.³

Jesus had been preaching and teaching throughout Galilee, but he was no priest. Yet people came up to him seeking healing. One of those who came forward was a leper. We know nothing about him except his disease. No name, no age, no sense of his family – all we are told, all that was important, was his leprosy. That was enough – he was a leper, he was unclean, contaminated and contagious. Unclean. All the respectable should stay away from him.

The man approached him, begging, and then kneeling in front of Jesus. He said to Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean." He must have recognized that there was healing power in this Jesus. Or maybe he had run out of other options. Doctors shrugged their shoulders and passed him onto specialists. He had tried going to the priests, and they had been unable to help. And so why not try begging this Jesus, asking for healing. "If you choose, you can make me clean." You can make me loved, acceptable, at home again in the world.

Jesus was "moved with pity," and stretched out his hand and touched him. Touched him! Jesus reached out his hand and touched him. That could have been it. We are just forty-one verses into the gospel and everyone watching probably thought that was the end. He touched him. That would be that – now Jesus too would be unclean. But as Jesus reached out, he said, "I do choose. Be made clean!" And instead of the disease spreading from the man to

Jesus, the healing power in Jesus moved outwards through his hand and immediately the leprosy left the man, and he was made clean.

The term leper in Biblical times is different than our contemporary Hansen's disease. The term seems to embrace a spectrum of skin diseases. As an attack on the skin, leprosy was thought to threaten the health of the entire community. One response was social isolation. Leviticus (13:45-46) commands lepers to warn others to avoid contact by shouting out "unclean" as they approached other people. Compounding the man's possible physical suffering and social isolation was a prevailing view that saw leprosy as God's punishment for sin.⁴

The movie, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, depicts the travels of young Che Guevara through South America. In the movie there is an amazing scene that features a leper colony. The staff of this jungle hospital lives across the river from the area where the patients live in isolation. One night the staff is having a party, with loud dancing and drinking and lantern lights. And the residents across the river can hear the happiness of the party. Suddenly Che decides to swim across the river – something never before attempted due to the swift current, not to mention the piranhas and alligators. And makes it across and is received with wild acclaim by the lepers. The party was not complete until those on both sides of the river could rejoice.

No river separated Jesus from the leper, but the gulf between them was just as wide. The leper knelt at his feet begging Jesus to make him clean. And Jesus said, "I do choose to make you clean," and he reached out and touched the man.

The story doesn't end with Jesus healing of this leper. There is a strange little twist to the ending.

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."

People listening to this story for the first time as well as biblical scholars wonder why Jesus said this. Why did Jesus warn the man to say nothing to anyone? Was he trying to preserve his anonymity? Did he want to keep his identity undercover? Was he trying to stay under the radar of the religious and political authorities who would, in the end, collaborate to kill him?

Ched Myers argues that Jesus was commanding the man "not to publicize a miracle but to help confront an ideological system." He is to go to the priest and make the offering to them – to show the priest that they do not alone hold the power to heal for money. Myers thinks Jesus wanted this particular healing to help heal the problems in this whole purity law system that kept some powerful and clean, and others on the outside, unclean and unheard.⁵

So we too have the opportunity and the obligation to do what Jesus commanded this former leper. To not just celebrate a long ago miracle of healing, but to break down oppressive structures that keep social barriers in place. We are called to follow Jesus out into the leper communities of our day. Using the language from the Brief Statement of Faith we will say together later, we are to model our lives on Jesus, whose actions speak louder than words in this gospel story. We follow Jesus, who was known for:

preaching good news to the poor
 and release to the captives . . .
 healing the sick
 and binding up the brokenhearted,
 eating with outcasts,
 forgiving sinners,

And that is not easy to do - to heal the sick, to bind up the brokenhearted, to eat with outcasts. It is not easy to challenge social taboos, to break through generations-old prejudices that warn us away from people, calling them unclean. So there it is – the challenge for us to live as Jesus did - to talk the talk and walk the walk. We could end here, with the message that Jesus reached out and healed the leper, and we are to go and do likewise.

But there is something deeper and more personal in this story. The problem with purity laws of any day or age is that we know that it is a precarious system. There is always someone just a bit purer than we are, healthier than we are, more popular than we are, a bit wealthier than we are, better looking, smarter. The problem with purity laws is that deep down they serve to oppress us, making us believe that we are not quite good enough just the way we are. The problem with purity laws is that it makes human worth relative – we are only valuable on a pecking order where some get the most Valentine cards and others get less, and the purity laws dictate that the one who has more is more loved and more valuable – and it is not too far of an extrapolation to think that those with the most are the most blessed by God.

This story isn't just about sending us out to go look for lepers to heal, but also to realize that we have times when we are like the leper in this story. Afraid of the human contact that will surely lead to scorn and rejection. Afraid of the certain shame. Afraid to approach even Jesus. And this is where Jesus' truth breaks through the lie of our purity systems. Jesus loves us even when we are at our most unlovable. Not when we are most good, but when we hurt the most. When we are acting out of our illnesses and pain – that is when Jesus reaches out to each of us saying, "I do choose. Be made clean." Know today that Jesus loves you. Know today that no matter the disease or isolation you face, you are loved. Know that no purity system, no form of oppression, no hateful words, no lack of Valentines can prevent God from loving you. For the truth and power of the gospel is that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Rosalind Wiseman, 2002.

² Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) 50-52. It is important to note that Borg offers a caveat (citing scholars with differing opinions) that the extent to which Jews followed the purity system is not clear.

³ Ched Myers, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988) 153.

⁴ Warren Carter, Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000) 199.

⁵ Myers, 153-154.