

“I Do Choose”

Mark 1: 40-45

We continue in the Gospel of Mark today and we read about a story of healing as one of Jesus’ first acts of his public ministry. This really should not come as a surprise because for Mark, healing was one of the main purposes of Jesus’ ministry.

What is surprising about this text is the wording and phrasing that Mark uses when the leper asks to be made well. Usually we get in these stories how someone approaches Jesus and flat out asks to be heal or Jesus will see them and ask if they want to be made well. However in this story, the leper approaches Jesus and almost dares Jesus to heal him. The leper says if you choose, you can make me well, almost as if he was challenging Jesus to take a risk and heal him, almost as if he wanted to see what would happen, if Jesus really would choose to heal him.

We know the rest of the story. Of course, Jesus takes the risk and says, “I do choose” and the leper is made well but not before Mark gives us an important detail, a detail that we can miss if we are not careful, a detail that opens our eyes to what the Kingdom of God is really calling us to do as followers of Jesus Christ

Mark tells us that Jesus is moved with piety. There is nothing new or surprising here in this statement. We know that Jesus is usually always moved with

piety in these situations, that's why he heals and restores the people who come to him and ask. That is why we claim him as our Lord and Savior. Jesus is usually always able to feel compassion for the people around him, even when we cannot.

But in this reading, Mark actually uses a different phrase at this part of the text, a phrase that surprises and challenges us, a phrase that because it is just a little too disturbing, translators over the years have tamed it down and sanitized it to mean piety.

Mark really uses at this point in the story, when the leper comes and dares Jesus to heal him, the phrase, "Moved with anger, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I do choose."

Moved with anger-that changes everything! This is not the Jesus we are used to reading about in our bible texts. This is not the Jesus that we like to see. This angry Jesus makes us uncomfortable. This angry Jesus is not someone we are used to encountering when we read these texts about healing. Sure we've heard stories about Jesus getting angry. We know that he goes into the Temple, gets angry at what he sees, turns the tables on the moneychangers and drives them out. That makes sense. We can understand why Jesus gets angry in that instance, but why now? Why this story? We aren't sure we like this angry Jesus or want him to hang around our churches too much.

We are used to seeing Jesus filled with compassion, moved with piety, tenderly looking upon us, telling us sweet words of inspiration. We like it when Jesus is nice. He becomes our friend and our companion. He is safe. He is comfortable. He fits quite nicely into the molds we have created of who and what the Son of God should be and do.

So what do we do with this angry Jesus? Just exactly who is Jesus angry with in this story?

After living with this text this week, I have come to realize that Jesus is not angry because the leper dared to ask to be made well. Jesus is angry because we as people of faith have set up a system that pushes the leper and all those “others” that we have deemed to be unclean and not worth our time to the side. Jesus is angry because we as people of faith have not welcomed them as children of God.

Jesus is angry with us as people of faith because we have stayed in our comfortable pews and never acknowledged the brokenness that surrounds us. Jesus is angry with us as people of faith because we have ministered from a distance and never really engaged the “other” as our brother and sisters in Christ, never engaged the “other” as made in the image of God, never engaged the other as created the same as you and me.

Jesus isn't angry because the leper wants to be made well. Of course, he wants to be made well. As a leper, he was excluded and ignored. He was pushed to

the sides of society. He had to shout “Unclean” everywhere he went so people would know not to touch him and do everything to avoid him. As a leper, he was separated from the community both religiously and socially. As a leper, he had been told that leprosy was his fault, that he had done something awful to cause it to happen. He had been told that because he was a sinner, God was punishing him with this disease and that until he fit in again, until he became clean, until he found someone who would risk becoming an outsider themselves, then he would never be accepted. As a leper, it was like he was the walking dead.

No, Jesus, isn't angry because this man asked to be made well. Jesus is angry because we as a society, as the church, have created a system based on exclusion, a system that has allowed the “living death” of countless people. We as a society as a church have isolated so many people from God's intended community of welcome based on their race, their gender, based on their beliefs, based on the labels this world has placed upon them, based on the fact that we see them as different and have never really tried to engage them as our brother and sisters in Christ.

Jesus is angry because once again, we have tried to manipulate and control the Kingdom of God. We have tried to tell God who is accepted and who is not. By our very actions or better yet, inaction, we have caused hurt and division and have weakened the Body of Christ here on earth.

We must realize that Jesus didn't come to minister from a long distance. Jesus didn't come to keep a safe distance from all the brokenness, the hurt, the ugliness of life. Jesus didn't come to just be with those who were like him. He came to bring new life. He met with society's outcasts and gave them hope. He restored broken relationship and reconfigured the world. Jesus came to transform the social order from exclusion to welcome. Jesus came to show us there is another way, God's way, the Kingdom of God's way, a way of peace, a way of grace, a way of acceptance, a way of love.

Fred Craddock, a well-known Disciple preacher, has shared that the problem with the church for a long time has been that we have never really understood just exactly who Jesus really was as the Messiah and what exactly his mission for the world really was. Craddock has shared that as the church, we assume that where the Messiah is, there is no misery when in reality, it is where there is misery, there is the Messiah.

Where there is misery, there is the Messiah! That's the good news! Jesus came to restore and to heal. Jesus came to open our eyes to where the Kingdom of God was already in our midst. Jesus did not come to make us comfortable but to bring comfort to those that were hurting, bring wholeness to those who were broken, to bring peace to those who were living in upheaval, to bring grace and welcome for all of God's children, to bring new life to all of God's creation.

The good news is that Jesus took a risk by touching this man who society deemed untouchable and brought the Kingdom of God near for this man. Jesus touched the leper and healed him, physically, and spiritually. This man is no longer pushed to the side. He is now embraced as one of God's very own.

Where there is misery, there is the Messiah! And where we should be as well as disciples and followers of Jesus Christ! We should be going out into our communities, the place we live, the place where we work, the places where we meet the "other" and truly engage them as children of God, engage them now not as the other but as our brothers and sisters, connected always through the love and grace of God!

This text challenges us to look beyond our comfortable pews and the four walls of our church buildings and really choose to engage the Kingdom of God that is on our doorsteps. This text calls us as people of faith to take an honest look at our calling as disciples and ask ourselves some very tough and scary questions: In our ministry and in our practices, do we choose to bring healing and new life to this broken world or do we choose to minister from a long, seemingly safe distance.

Mark wants us to know that discipleship has risks and as disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to embrace those risk and break down the barriers that are used to separate and divide. We are called to show that there is another way. We

are called to become emphatically connect with those society and the world have deemed unclean and not worth their time. We are called to put ourselves at risk and truly be the Body of Christ in this world.

As a church, as a community of faith, as people of God, for us to truly live out our calling as disciples, we have to realize that Jesus didn't come just for us or to meet our needs. Jesus came to make us more aware of the needs of those around us. Jesus came so that all of God's children might experience new life. Jesus came so that the good news of God's Kingdom would be shared and experienced by all of God's children.

The thing that Mark wants us to understand is that as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to have both compassion and anger: Compassion for the broken and hurting, compassion for the other that this world has said is not worthy balanced by an anger that makes us say that the way things are will not be tolerated, Compassion so that we can become the heart and hands of Christ for our neighbors, balanced by an anger that stirs us out of our comfortable pews, and makes us become aware of the unjust systems around, compassion and passion that inspires us to do something, to say something about the injustices that we see around us.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to share compassion and passion . We are called to say that the way of this world is not okay and we will not tolerate

it. We are called to bring healing and new life for all of God's children and become a part of God's work here on earth. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to choose to make others well by sharing the experience of community, welcome, and grace. We are called to take risks and engage the "other" as our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus chose to make this man well and as his disciples, we are called to do the same. We are called to bring new life and healing for all of God's children by taking risks, by becoming connected with the people around us, people like us, and people who are not like us, by moving beyond our pews and these four walls and truly engaging all of God's children as our brothers and sisters in Christ. WE are called to choose the riskiest option of all: to love our neighbors as God loves us.

That is what being a disciple is all about: choosing love instead of separation.

We are called to choose life for all of God's creation.

May we always choose to take the risk and make others well. Amen.

May we always choose compassion for others and risk joining the others on the margins. Amen.