

“Everyone’s Talking”

The Way of Jesus – part 5

Mark 1:40-45

Between Oahu and Maui in the Hawaiian Islands there is a rural, secluded island called Molokai. On Molokai, there is a beautiful peninsula that you see in this picture called Kalaupapa. Kalaupapa is the site of a leper colony started in the 1860’s.¹ According to history, almost 8,000 people, mostly native Hawaiians were forcibly exiled to this colony over the course of a century.² This practically inaccessible peninsula was under quarantine until 1969. The fear of leprosy was so intense, it literally separated people from their families, communities, and society as a whole.

Today modern medicine can treat the symptoms of what is now known as Hansen’s disease. But oddly, after the quarantine in Kalaupapa was lifted, many people still chose to live on the peninsula and remain secluded. There is still a historical stigma still attached to the disease today. The main reason is due to bible passages that describe leprosy as “repulsive and unclean.”³ It seems that the people who lived in Kalaupapa did not want to reclaim their freedom and enter back into a world that they felt was still very much against them.

The scripture we read today about Jesus and the leper is short, only six total verses, but with a whole lot packed in it. First of all, we need to understand that leprosy in the Bible is not specifically Hansen’s disease. Please don’t think of a man wrapped in bandages like a mummy with his appendages falling out as he groveled before Jesus. Leprosy, in the Bible, was any external skin abnormality. It

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/05/when-the-last-patient-dies/394163/>

² <http://www.kalaupapaohana.org/names-project.html>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/05/when-the-last-patient-dies/394163/>

marked you, literally, as unclean, and as a consequence, you had to live outside of the community.

Just as is the case in Kalaupapa, the rules in the Bible for lepers were pretty severe. You can find them in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Here is just one section, from 13:45-46.

⁴⁵“Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ ⁴⁶As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.”

I don’t know if it is possible for any of us to fully empathize with this man. I have been sick before, and I have been in a self-imposed quarantine. But a cold or the flu might last a week...can you imagine being isolated for several years, maybe your whole life? No one could touch this man. Anytime anyone got near him, he would have to shout, “Go away! I’m unclean.” In fact, it was against the law for this man to even approach Jesus. The leper was that desperate to be healed.

There is another interesting linguistic quirk in this passage. The NIV says Jesus was moved with compassion. That makes sense to us. Jesus is loving, kind, and has pity on outcasts, like this man. However, some other Bible translations say Jesus was indignant, even angry. I wonder what could he have been angry about? It seems unlikely that Jesus was mad at this poor man. Maybe Jesus was angry with the customs that kept this man from being loved, from re-entering the community. After all, the story of Kalaupapa disturbed me.

But I have another theory. Jesus is the Savior of the world; he came to conquer sin. Romans 5:12 says that sin entered the world through one man

(Adam), and through sin, death. Death came to all, because all sinned. One of the consequences of sin and death is that illnesses and disease afflict us. So here is what I think: Jesus was angry with sin in general, that God’s perfect creation was corrupted so that this leper was not only diseased, he was isolated. And fortunately, Jesus could do something about both.

The man’s request is rather strange. He doesn’t say, “Please heal me.” He says, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” (Mark 1:40) The man does not even call Jesus “Lord” or “Master.” Just, “you.” But he seems pretty confident of Jesus’ power to heal. This is an indication of just how powerful Jesus’ reputation is. Yet, this man is looking for more than just healing. He is looking for mercy.

And Jesus has mercy for the man. Jesus touches him and says, “I am willing. Be clean.” The touch is significant. Jesus entered into this man’s world. Previously, the leper was untouchable, unwelcome, and unloved. After Jesus healed him, he was made whole, physically and spiritually. It is a great moment.

Then Jesus has to go and say something strange. “Don’t tell anyone. Go to the priests. Offer the sacrifice Moses commanded.” Wait, what? Jesus, what do you mean, “Don’t tell anyone?” The gospel writer always seems to be trying to make the truth of Jesus a great secret. It’s like having a lucky fishing spot. I’ll brag about all the fish I caught, but don’t ask me to show you where! Why would Jesus not want this man tell others of this miracle? I think the answer is simple: Jesus was humble. Jesus did not want his ministry to become a spectacle. He did not want the miracle business to distract him from his ultimate purpose – to die for us on the cross.

Well, despite Jesus’ warning, the leper does not listen. He tells everyone he can find what happened to him. And once again, Jesus has to withdraw to lonely,

deserted places. One of my commentaries offers this insight: “It is ironic that ... the leper and Jesus effectively change places: the [leper] had been unable to enjoy social contact; [Jesus] must now endure too much.” (ANTC, Mark)

Here is the thing: There are still a lot of people in this world who are isolated. They are sick in the soul. How do I know? Because I know for a fact that I am one of them. I may not have open sores on my skin, but I have sores on my heart. And I bet if you are honest, you have them, too.

When I was younger, I made the intentional choice to say to Jesus, “If you are willing, you can make me whole.” As a child, as a teenager, and again as an adult, I turned my life over to Jesus to let him give me a new life, to let myself be drawn into a new community of faith.

I know I am not alone in this choice. But here is the curious thing. Many of us still live today like Jesus has commanded us, “Don’t tell anyone else what has happened to you.” It is like there is an unspoken taboo – “If Jesus has changed your life, don’t tell anyone! Keep it to yourself.”

Jesus, when he told this former leper not to openly declare this miracle, had not yet gone to the cross. He had not yet fulfilled his mission on earth to save us. But, church, answer me honestly – Has Jesus risen from the dead? Yes? Then why do we still live as though this must be kept secret?

I want to encourage you with this simple fact: We can tell the world that we care because Jesus cares. We don’t have to let people live in isolation or in fear. We don’t have to watch people withdraw or be sent away because they are different. We can speak for justice. We can love as Jesus loved. I guarantee you, it is not be easy. It will be messy. It will be hard. But it is something we must do.

Listen to these words from Psalm 30. (1-2 & 11-12)

"I will exalt you, LORD,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.

² LORD my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me...."

¹¹ You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
¹² that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.
LORD my God, I will praise you forever."

Those should be the words of praise coming from our lips. Think about it: the leper knew what Jesus had done for him, and he could not remain silent. I have to ask you, do you know what Jesus has done for you? Are you grateful that he died to save you? Has he rescued you from something significant in your life? If yes, to whom have you told the good news? And if not, have you prayed that Jesus would show you his amazing grace?

Jesus no longer says, "Tell no one." He doesn't even say, "Tell someone." Now he says, "Tell everyone!" (Mark 16:15) No more isolation. Let's talk about salvation.

Memory Verse: Mark 1:41-42

Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed."

Reflection Questions:

1. When have you been healed, physically or spiritually? How did God bring about that healing?

2. When have you been isolated from community? When and how have you isolated others? Did fear play a role?
3. Why do you think Jesus told the leper not to tell anyone about the miracle?
4. What is your part in the church’s proclamation of the good news?