

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from February 15, 2009

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“Symptoms and Systems”

Scriptures:

Psalm 30

Mark 1:40-45



All is not always as it first appears. As we take a look around at our wider culture on this mid-February day, we may be happily eating Valentine chocolates from yesterday, shopping for Presidents’ Day automobiles tomorrow, celebrating Black History all month, and wearing red to raise awareness about heart disease. If we dig a little deeper into each one of those, however, we learn that yesterday was not all hearts and flowers for the lonely, the newly divorced or the widowed; that many of the brand-new 2009 autos on display in showrooms tomorrow still emit too much in the way of fumes poisonous to our atmosphere; that we should have been incorporating black history into our American history books a century ago; and that women eating too many of those chocolate bon-bons only contribute to their heart disease, which has become their #1 killer.

Now, that I’ve bummed you all out, let’s look at the gospel! I call these things to your attention because our gospel story this morning appears at first to be a simple Jesus healing story. But further study, digging deeply into various translations and scholarly commentaries and writings, reveals a deeper significance to this story, which we will explore together this morning.

Let’s start with leprosy and Leviticus. Leviticus is the third book of the Torah, the third book of what we term as the Old Testament, and it’s the one most of us gloss over until we have to read it carefully, because it’s the one with all the prescriptions and rituals and rules for the ancient Hebrew priestly system. Chapters 13 and 14 address leprosy and being clean and unclean, and suffice it to say for our purposes this morning that leprosy can refer to a variety of skin diseases and more, that priests do not do the actual healing, but have the power to declare someone unclean and thus, hold the power to banish and exclude the afflicted and are the only ones who can declare the person clean once again, but only upon the required offerings being submitted and a cleansing ritual being performed by the priest.

So the leper in our passage this morning approaches Jesus having been declared unclean. He is not allowed to be around other people, because contact with him will contaminate: whoever the leper touches will become unclean as well. The only way for him to get out of this predicament is for his skin condition to disappear, for him to return to the priest for an examination, and if the priest thinks his symptoms are gone, then to give the priest the prescribed offer-

ing (two lambs without blemish and a grain offering) and go through the intricate cleansing ritual. That's the only way the leper can come back into his camp, his community, and the worship tent.

The leper approaches Jesus begging him and saying, "If you choose, you can make me clean." A declaration of faith on the part of the leper, yes, but also a bit of a dare, because he knows, as does Jesus, that if Jesus touches him, Jesus is now considered unclean.

Our translation next reads, "Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand". "Moved with pity"... and this is where we find upon further study that all is not as it first appears. Some translations read "moved with compassion" or "deeply moved." The Greek word describing Jesus' emotional condition at this point is also translated as "moved with anger." And the best explanation I have found for the word explains it as really something in between, and if you've ever been so moved by encountering victims of injustice that you feel anger rise within you, then you'll understand this explanation.

Markan scholars Brian Blount and Gary Charles say that the word in question identifies a profoundly intense emotional response that viscerally propels one feeling compassion into action on behalf of others. Charles further writes that the compassion of Jesus is not sentimental pity for the leper but compassion that compels Jesus to reach across the boundary of disease to touch an untouchable, violating Jewish law, and to render himself ritually unclean.

This should not surprise us about Jesus, but it certainly deepens our understanding of the significance of Jesus boldly responding, "I do choose." With full knowledge of the current reigning exclusive system and its consequences, upon seeing one glaring example of its symptoms, Jesus responds by busting through a barrier and stretching out his hand and touching the unclean man. "I do choose. Be made clean!"

And next is where we get another chance to understand the story behind the story. Jesus, sternly warning the healed leper, sends him back to the priests. Literal translation for sternly warning? "Snorting with indignation"! Another renowned Markan scholar, Ched Myers, explains Jesus' sending the leper back to the priests as "deciding to make an issue of it," a protest against a system which subjects the physically ailing to a double oppression: ostracizing second-class citizens who must make special payment to get back in. The cleansed leper's task is not to publicize a miracle but to help confront an ideological system. Go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them, meaning as a witness against them.

But the leper does not comply, so now Jesus cannot go into a town openly. Again, scholars debate Jesus' reasons for laying low. Some attribute it to a desire to contain his popularity, but a growing number point to his now being a marked man – considered unclean by the establishment by virtue of his touching a leper.

So, this morning, we are left with a gospel reading which we can take at face value, or we can peer behind it and under it to draw deeper significance for our lives today. The fact is, in this booming information age in which we live today, we know too much to simply accept

things at face value. And because we know too much, we need to pay attention to those emotions which overtake us at times when in our media we see children wallowing in poverty in Haiti, people living with and dying from AIDS in Africa, genocide, torture, starvation. That visceral response should not and, by virtue of our accepting Jesus as our divine model for living, cannot be ignored.

Jesus shows us this morning, that it's not enough to heal. With that healing also comes the responsibility to address the system that erects barriers to healing or that doles out the hurt in the first place. We know too much. It's not enough to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless. We also need to address the kinks and quirks and, yes, the injustices and greed that lurk behind the systems that leave people out on the doorstep. It's not enough to set up free clinics or tutoring programs unless we also address the flaws in our medical, education and all the other systems that find us picking up the marginalized and scooping up the ostracized from the sidewalks of our own leper colonies.

We know too much. We know too much to turn a blind eye. Just like we know too much about the effects of excess sugar on heart disease, and the effects of auto emissions, we know too much to be content with simply addressing the symptoms. Just as Jesus dared to touch the untouchable, we, too, are called to get our hands dirty. The risk? That we, like Jesus, may end up on the outskirts for awhile. But notice how our reading ends: But 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.

The daring, bold, loving action of reaching out to heal, of turning the tables on the status quo, may appear at first to isolate us, but the good news of the gospel has a way of getting around. People still came to him from every quarter. Whether we are moved by pity or moved by anger, or their emotional combination, the important thing is that we are moved, moved to live the gospel we read and study, moved to respond like Jesus and say, "I do choose." Amen.

