

6.21.09 / Mark 1:40-45

Between the casting out of the unclean spirit and this incident there are two brief stories. Jesus stops at Simon's (Peter's) house after leaving the synagogue in which he confronted the demon. Peter's mother-in-law is there, and is ill, and Jesus heals her. This causes a large crowd to arrive with sick people, and more demon-oppressed people, all of whom Jesus heals. He then leaves the town before dawn and goes to pray. When his disciples find him he goes on to other towns in Galilee preaching, healing, and exorcising.

What did it mean for those who first heard it?

A small minority of texts suggest that, in verse 41, Jesus is moved with anger, not pity or compassion. This is generally considered to be an error of some kind.

Leprosy is pretty central to this story. So central, in fact, that it will be nearly impossible to discuss this passage in a group without making sure everyone is caught up on this issue.

The term "leprosy" (tsara'ath in Hebrew, lepra in Greek, the language of the source text for this passage) can refer to a number of diseases other than "true" leprosy (or Hansen's disease). In Hebrew, the term simply refers to a surface change or rot, and can be applied to things like mold on clothing.

That said, the laws regarding leprosy are extremely strict. Leviticus 13 outlines them (as well as the sacrifices made before the priests that this story mentions). Most importantly, a leper must wear torn clothing, unkempt hair, cover his or her upper lip, live outside the camp, and go about crying, "Unclean! Unclean!" Contracting leprosy, whether it was what modern medicine calls leprosy or not, meant exile from the community (There is some evidence that lepers formed their own communities, but this is a small comfort when one is expelled from one's family and town).

And, finally, leprosy was, as all uncleanness was, considered extremely contagious. Touching a leper caused the person who touched the leper to become unclean as well, although not to the same level.

So, within this story we have a man who is a social outcast. Jesus' response, touching him, would, under the Law, make Jesus unclean as well.

1) The leper kneels, implores, and prefaces his statement with, "If you will/If you would like to." What does this suggest about the leper's emotional state and attitude? What causes the leper to adopt this attitude?

2) One interesting facet of the New Testament is that it sometimes breaks out of the categories we have in interesting ways. Exorcisms, for instance, are sometimes called healings. Is this story, which, since it removes a disease, would be termed a "healing" by us, presented as a story about disease and healing or about cleanliness and uncleanness? Is the word "heal" or "healed" ever used? How do Jesus and the leper refer to the action happening, and the leper's end state?

3) When we talk about cleanliness we are talking about Law, and covenant. It's the Law that defines cleanliness, and cleanliness is a covenant condition. In the Law only one item, the altar, is sufficiently marked by God's holiness to actually render items that touch it clean. If you are a 1st century ethnic Jew considering Christianity

what does it mean that the Messiah (the covenant restorer/enforcer) touches someone who is deeply unclean, and, rather than becoming unclean, cleanses the unclean? What might this indicate about the covenant Jesus is bringing? What does it mean about the person of Jesus?

4) What does it mean that Jesus deals with, and cares about, someone so intensely marginalized as the leper in this story?

5) Why does Jesus want the leper to stay quiet? This is a major theme in Mark – Jesus does a miracle, and then tries to keep everyone quiet. Why?

What does it mean in our current context?

1) Does the leper's attitude serve as a model for us? Is his humility admirable, or is his cringing attitude a product of how poorly he understands God's love for him? How should we approach God? Is there one way to do this, or does it depend on circumstance?

2) Generally when we think of cleanliness we think of soap and water. Is there a way to talk about the sort of cleanliness that appears in this story in terms we don't already have other ideas about? What would this look like? Is it something we want? Is it something we have? Is so, how did we get it?

3) The leper offers sacrifices for his cleansing (the sacrifices don't heal him, they are merely a response to God's goodness). Is this response merely obedience to the Law (which prescribes such offerings), or is it a model of thankfulness to be followed? How would this be emulated, if it is a model?

4) Who, within our society, functions as the lepers did in Galilee of Jesus' day? Who is outcast? Who is considered a danger to those who mingle with them? How would Jesus have us respond?

Weekly Questions to Ask the Group

What do we notice about God in this passage?

How should this passage change the way we live our lives?