

“SPREAD THE WORD!”
Acts 10:34-43; Mark 1:40-45
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What will the doctor say? Will the tests be positive or negative? Will the surgery be successful? What are my chances? These are concerns that face every family. In the United States, cancer and heart disease are the two most prominent diagnoses and the two terms we dread hearing the most. Nobody wants heart problems or cancer, and we pray that we will not have to deal with either one.

I dare say nobody in Cleveland or in our listening area worries that he or she will be diagnosed with **leprosy**. We just don't worry much about that. But in Bible times, the word “leprosy” had much the same impact upon a person's demeanor as cancer or heart disease has today. Folks earnestly prayed that they would not get leprosy, for one's whole life changed dramatically if one became a victim of this dread disease. Leprosy causes the skin to become red and white and then to peel, like a perpetual sunburn, but much more raw-looking and much more repulsive to view.

In ancient Palestine, the managing of leprosy was well-controlled. Lepers were complete outcasts. They were always beggars, for they were not permitted other forms of employment. Lepers were not allowed to interact with the more healthy population, or to worship with the community. The Old Testament laws in Leviticus dictated that lepers were to wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, and cover the lower part of their faces. They were not allowed to live in town, but had to live in outlying areas, isolated from the mainstream of society. When they came into town to buy food or to take care of other necessary business, lepers were to shout, “Unclean! Unclean!” to warn healthy people of the danger. Is it any wonder that leprosy was the dread disease of Bible times?

In the Bible, the word “leprosy” is used to describe several skin diseases, but according to Bible scholars, its precise meaning is uncertain. People were not sure what leprosy was, and they really didn't know how people contracted the disease. They believed it was contagious, although they didn't know for sure. Certainly we know today that just being in the same room with a person who has leprosy would not cause one to catch the disease. But because of the fears of the people, that they, too, might contract this disease which made a person repulsive to look at, lepers were ostracized and forced to live outside the circle of the community.

It must have taken considerable courage for the man in our Gospel lesson to approach Jesus that day in Galilee. Mark says simply that a leper came to Jesus, and begged to be healed. He is not even given a name. Note also the singular article: not a group of lepers, who stuck together for support; not a leper and his family seeking help for the one who was ill. No, this story is about one solitary man, who had to move through that vast crowd with his lower face

covered, his hair a mess, crying, “Unclean! Unclean!” Imagine fighting your way through a crowd with an assignment like that! Finally, he gets to Jesus, and kneels before him in sincere faith and exclaims, “*Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.*”

Then the most amazing thing happens! Jesus stretches out his hand and touches the man who has leprosy. The crowd must have cringed in horror. Doesn’t the Bible say, “Stay your distance from these people?” Didn’t Jesus know that he was forbidden to touch this unclean man? Didn’t he know better than to put his hand on that raw, red, scaly skin?

But here is Jesus, reaching out, putting his hand on this diseased man’s body and saying, “*Be made clean.*” And the Bible says that immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean.

I’m sure there was not a happier man in all Judea than this leper who was healed by Jesus. The healing literally gave this man a whole new lease on life. He could not wait to tell his family, his friends, anyone who would listen, about what had happened to him and about this man who changed his life!

But the story is not over, for Jesus says to the jubilant ex-leper, “Don’t tell anybody about this! Say nothing to anyone!” You’ve got to be kidding! I can’t keep news like this to myself! First of all, I look different. Everybody’s going to know something happened to me. I’m not ugly and scaly anymore. What is more, I feel different! I not only look better, but I have new energy, and now I can do the things I only dreamed about before. I am so grateful, it will take me the rest of my life to say “thank you” to the one who healed my body and restored my life.

Why would Jesus tell the cleansed leper to keep quiet about his healing? Bible scholars have spilled much ink on that question. Jesus, knowing human nature, knew that once word got out, people would come in droves to be healed. But Jesus is not just a doctor with the latest cure. Physical healing is only one part of Jesus’ ministry. The healing of people’s spiritual problems is much more important and much more consequential. Yet the spiritual dimension of Jesus’ ministry could easily become overshadowed by his miracle cures. I believe that Jesus asks the leper to keep quiet so that people will not come to him for the wrong reasons. Yet we know the rest of the story. The man could not keep quiet. The Bible tells us that “He went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to **spread the word.**”

The leper who was healed was ecstatic. It was the happiest day of his life. But I wonder how long it took before he was welcomed into society again. I wonder how many of his relatives were skeptical of his healing? How many of his former friends had moved on while he had been in the leper camp? Did he get his old job back? How much difficulty did the cleansed leper have re-entering society?

Oh, we don’t worry much about leprosy today. I doubt if there is a single case of it at the Cleveland Clinic or at University Hospitals. Yet there are lepers in our city this morning. There are people who look differently than we do and act differently than we do; people who, for one reason or another are excluded from the mainstream of society, maybe even from participation in the United Methodist Church.

I am thinking of Jeff, a man in a church I served, a person nearly my age, who at the time I was pastor there, lived with his parents, a man who is severely mentally retarded. On a good day, Jeff could feed himself, dress himself, and walk to the bus, where he attended a sheltered workshop. His mother, now deceased, told me with great pain in her voice, that as she would walk Jeff to the school bus, so-called normal children would open the windows of their school

bus and yell, “Retard! Retard!” and other derogatory names at her son and the other folks on their way to the sheltered workshop.

How often we shun those we do not understand. We make judgments, doing more damage than we know. Such action is called **prejudice**, and prejudice, according to the dictionary is “an opinion formed without taking time and care to judge fairly.” That, unfortunately, is not limited to kids on the school bus.

Social scientists observe that most of us like to be with people like us. We gravitate toward those with whom we have much in common. Now there’s nothing inherently wrong with that, except that subtly, when we associate only with people like us, we exclude others in thoughtless and sometimes cruel ways. I know some people who were part of a couples card club. When the husband died, the wife was excluded, because this was a couples club, and everybody knows you have to have partners to play cards. I know families where divorced people are treated like lepers. With the awkwardness of the in-laws and the children and all, they just don’t fit in. You do understand.

I know churches where some people just don’t fit in. In some congregations, unless you were born in that community, you are always seen as an outsider. I remember when I was a District Superintendent going to a church for a meeting concerning some problems they were having. I asked each person at the meeting to share when they became part of the congregation. After the meeting a woman said to me, “I have been a member of this church for 19 years, but I still don’t feel part of this congregation. We moved here from out of town, you see.” Against the backdrop of a provincialism that builds walls and excludes people, we hear the clarion call of Jesus, who reaches out to the leper, and makes clean one whom society wants nothing to do with.

In the days of the early church, it must have been rather traumatic for Cornelius, a Gentile, an Italian officer in Caesar’s army, to be told by God to approach Simon Peter, a Jew. It must have been equally traumatic for Simon Peter to have a vision where he was told to eat pork and lobster and all the other foods that were prohibited in the Old Testament. I know a Jewish woman who no longer feels compelled to eat only Kosher food, but she says that the prohibition in her childhood was so strong that she cannot eat pork. In fact, the smell of pork when it is being cooked literally makes her sick to her stomach. Now in this marvelous tenth chapter of Acts, Peter is being told to enjoy a ham dinner! More than that, God tells him to go to the home of Cornelius, an unclean Gentile. Peter is being told to ignore the teaching of his Jewish upbringing not to enter the home of a Gentile. Instead, Peter is being asked to tell this Italian soldier about Jesus!

Peter rises to the occasion and does what God asks. He begins his sermon with these words, *“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him.”*

If you read the rest of the New Testament, you know that the battle was not over. It still isn’t. We have to be nudged, sometimes pushed, even kicked into being the people God calls us to be. Peter had a vision in which God showed him what the church should look like. Cornelius had a vision that led him to place his trust in the teaching of this Jewish fisherman. God is still in the business of putting a vision before us of acceptance, openness, and love.

The United Methodist Church is an inclusive church. “Open Minds, Open Hearts, Open Doors.” Easy for us to say, but not nearly as easy to practice. Oh, we don’t stand at the door and ask people to pass a litmus test before we let them come in. But by our actions we subtly or not

so subtly draw a circle that keeps some people out.

A few years ago the Trustees completed a questionnaire entitled, “Whom do we exclude?” We usually think of those with handicapping conditions. We have two elevators, parking places marked for those with handicapping conditions, and helpful ushers at the door. But the questionnaire didn’t stop there. Those who cannot read would have a difficult time in our worship services. Those for whom English is not a primary language could feel somewhat on the outside. And the list went on. Whom do we exclude at Church of the Saviour?

Many of you know that I was heavily involved in the Vision 2000 movement that swept across our church and did so much to revitalize congregations in our denomination. I had the privilege of bringing Tony Campolo to Akron to speak at a rally. He told that day that has not left my mind. He said when he was in high school, one of the boys was known to be a homosexual. He said one day in the locker room, the other boys decided to beat this boy up, urinate on him, and completely humiliate him. Later that week, the young man committed suicide.

In April of 1987, British Princess Diana opened an AIDS clinic at Middlesex Hospital in London. She was the first member of a royal family to demonstrate to the world that you can touch an AIDS victim and not catch that dread disease.

None of us here fears leprosy. Yet there are lepers in Cleveland Heights and in Shaker Heights and in every community in the greater Cleveland area. Whom do we exclude? For whom is the welcome mat at this church only a word and not a reality?

During Lent, we are being asked to take a small step: to give 90 minutes of service over a 90 day period. An hour and a half over a month and a half is not much. But we are being asked to go somewhere we might not normally go, and do to something we might not normally do. We are being asked to take God’s message of love and acceptance and concern to others in a tangible way. We are being asked to reach out and touch the lives of others, to spread the word that we know someone who can help us and heal us.

You and I are being called to take a step forward in faith. Jesus is saying to us, “Be made clean! Be made whole! Receive the unconditional love of God. Experience the healing touch of Jesus. And then share what you have received with others.” Let us open our hearts and widen our circle to include those on the outside. *“For I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to God.”* Spread that word, won’t you? Spread the Word of the Lord!

Prayer: O God, as we hear the story of Jesus reaching out and healing a man who had leprosy, help us to realize that Jesus is willing to reach out to us as well. May we experience the healing touch of Jesus, and then spread the word that the same healing touch is available to all persons. This is our prayer, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.