

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 1:40-45

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Leprosy was the most feared disease of antiquity. It was a horrible disease in which people's hands and face and body were eaten away. People who were lepers were forbidden to have any contact with people. They were sent out into the countryside. They were required by Jewish law to say "unclean, unclean" to anybody who was near so that they would not come near them. It was forbidden that anyone would touch them or even be close to them because of fear that the epidemic would spread. The societal structures of Jesus' day were trying to prevent an epidemic. That was also why it was necessary for the leper to prove his cleansing to the priest in order to be free to enter into normal social relationships again. This was a legal as well as a religious matter. He needed to offer a sacrifice but he also needed to show himself to the priest so that the priest could authorize that he was indeed clean. The offering was a sign of his cleansing that would convince people that he really was clean. Only this would convince people to no longer isolate him and drive him again into quarantine.

The desperation of the leper is reflected in the way in which he asks Jesus. He begs him and kneels before him, and says "If you want to, you can make me clean." The translation here matters. The NRSV translates the Greek word *thelas* (from the verb, *thelo*) as "If you choose" and the NIV as "If you are willing." Both are possible translations but neither conveys in English the depth and intensity of either the leper's request or Jesus' response (NRSV-"I do choose" NIV-"I am willing.") The best translation is "If you want to" and "I want to." The word that is used for "moved with pity" (NRSV) in Greek is *splagnizo* (NIV adopts the Western textual reading *orgisthas*, "angry, indignant.") The best translation is "deeply moved" or "moved with compassion." The verb *splagnizo* literally means "to turn over the bowels." If you've ever had that experience of seeing or talking with someone who was disfigured, had suffered a grave injury or lost a limb, you can feel your bowels turning over with compassion for that person. That's what is described here and you need to convey the intensity of that emotion in your words and in the tone.

For Jesus to stretch out his hand and to touch him was a big deal. In the context of the culture of the first century, Jesus' act of touching meant that he contracted the uncleanness and might contract the disease. Touching the leper was an act of great courage as well as compassion. Jesus says to him in response "I want to. I want to make you clean. Be clean." This is performative language. It is like, "By the authority vested in me by the State of Ohio and by the United Methodist Church, I declare that you are husband and wife," which is trivial in comparison to what Jesus was doing but it is the same kind of language. It is a word that DOES what he is talking about. Immediately then, the leprosy left him and the gesture here is of the leper looking at his hands and seeing indeed that he was clean. It was the transformation of his life and the removal of the curse of this illness. You can't over do it here. I would suggest that you do a gesture

of clasping and then releasing your hands and looking with wonder at your “clean” hands. The healing of the leper demonstrates that Jesus had power over leprosy.

Jesus then talks to him sternly and sends him away telling him to tell no one about what had happened but simply go to the priest, offer the sacrifice that was required by the law as a sign of his cleansing to the people and then just go home. First of all, Jesus is acting as a law-observant Jew who knows that this leper’s future depends on his doing what was required by the law as a proof of his cleansing. Jesus commands him to observe the law. If you want a sense of the legal/religious system of Israel in dealing with leprosy, read Leviticus 13-14, and in particular the law for purification in 14.1-32 including the provisions for a poor man who cannot afford the cost of two birds and two lambs. But in telling the man to tell no one about the healing, Jesus is also seeking to protect himself. The story implies that Jesus knew that if the word got out that he had healed a leper, he would be besieged by the people. So Jesus tries to keep it secret.

This injunction to the leper introduces two themes that will be developed throughout Mark’s story: the so-called messianic secret and the related issue of to tell or not to tell. There has been extensive scholarly discussion about the messianic secret, a distinctive element of Mark’s story. In my view, this is a relatively simple element of the story’s plot. Jesus’ silencing of the demons, the recipients of his healing, and his disciples is related to his passion prophecies. The implication of the story is that Jesus knows that he will be arrested and killed if his identity as Messiah becomes known. And that is precisely what happens in the Sanhedrin trial. As soon as he publicly confesses his identity in response to the high priest’s question—“Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?”—he is condemned to death. (14.61-64) Jesus had a good reason for trying to keep his messianic identity secret.

The motif of “to tell or not to tell” is frequently, as here, a humorous element of Mark’s story. Almost every time that Jesus tells someone not to tell about what he has done, people go out and proclaim it everywhere (exceptions are, for example, Jairus and his wife after the healing of their daughter Mark 5.43). Throughout the story, Jesus tells people not to tell and they instead go out and tell the story. The Gospel ends with the reversal of this pattern. In the concluding story of the empty tomb, the young man tells the three women to go and tell. And they flee from the tomb and say nothing to anyone! In regard to this theme of telling the story, the people of Mark’s story are like children who do the exact opposite of what they are told to do. The leper is the first. Jesus tells him not to tell anyone but the man is so ecstatic about what has happened that he becomes the first evangelist and spreads the word and preaches (*kerrusso*=*kerygma*) the story everywhere. Thus, the leper becomes the first preacher of the word. And, because of the resulting flood of people, Jesus has to hide out in the wilderness or desert places (*eramos* is translated better as “wilderness” or “desert places” than “country” NRSV or

“lonely places” NIV; it is the same word as in the earlier stories of John the Baptist and Jesus’ temptation: 1.3,4,12,13).

In this story, this reversal is delightful. The story invites you to show both Jesus’ seriousness and the leper’s joy and enthusiasm in your telling. This is a highly emotional story. Jesus’ action of healing a leper is unprecedented in the history of the prophets of Israel and is a truly extraordinary demonstration of power.

This story invites us as listeners to identify with the leper. What are the areas of uncleanness in your life? When have you experienced being isolated from others? When have you wanted to beg for help? How has Jesus touched and healed you? The song, “He Touched Me,” is a song of the leper. The story also invites us to become tellers of the story just as the leper did. This service might even be a time in which persons could be invited to tell their stories, probably best to the person next to them. And there might be people in the community who could tell their story to everyone “as a testimony to them.”