

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner  
February 15, 2009 – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Mark 1:40-45

### The Gospel is Not G-Rated

Jon Walton, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New York City, claims that the New Revised Standard Version of this story in Mark is way too sanitized and cleaned up, perhaps so as not to offend our innocent ears. It is as if the translators took a PG story and made it G rated for the good church folks. Dr. Walton is particularly aggravated because the NRSV states that Jesus, when he met the leper, was “moved with pity,” and that after the healing was effected, Jesus “sent the man away at once.” But, according to Walton, the story actually reads more like this (see if you can hear a difference):

*A leper came to Jesus begging him for help. Kneeling, the leper said, “If you choose; you can make me clean.” Snorting in anger, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him. After sternly warning him, Jesus pushed the leper out, saying, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest, and offer what Moses commanded for your cleansing.”<sup>i</sup>*

Did you hear a difference? You hear a very different description of Jesus than what you find in our church Bible. With the way the story reads in our church Bible, it sounds like another story of gentle Jesus – our Shepherd Savior being moved with pity, sending the man away. But when you hear Dr. Walton’s closer translation, you hear a passionate, maybe even uncomfortably abrupt Jesus – a Jesus snorting in anger, pushing the leper out. Another commentator writes that with his language, Mark was trying to convey that Jesus experienced a profoundly intense, deeply emotional response to the leper and his request. It was the kind of emotional response that viscerally propels one from simply feeling compassion for others, into one doing action on behalf of others<sup>ii</sup>. In other words, there is nothing sentimental about how Jesus reacted to the leper that day.

But why did Jesus snort with anger? Surely he was not mad at the poor guy for having leprosy. It certainly was not anything he would choose to have nor was it something he deserved. No, Jesus would not get angry at someone for being sick. And surely Jesus was not mad simply because the leper interrupted Jesus’ plans for that day. You remember from last week – Jesus had just left Capernaum to go to other towns and villages. He had told Simon that God was calling him to proclaim God’s kingdom and to do God’s work of ministry in new territories.

But then, just as he starts on his way, the leper comes up and stops him in his tracks. Now – I certainly understand how frustrating it can be to get all ready for a trip with your stuff, kids and dog already packed in the car like sardines just to have someone come to the door to sell you something or the phone to ring ... But again, that cannot be why Jesus snorted with anger. Sure, Jesus might have gotten annoyed by having his trip momentarily stopped, but certainly not angry. So what was going on? Why did Jesus snort with anger after the leper asked to be made clean?

Perhaps Jesus’ anger was fueled by the leper’s question itself. I am not sure if you noticed, but the leper did not say “If you choose, you can make me well.” No, instead the leper said, “If you

choose, you can make me **clean.**” Clean, not well. Because for that leper, the worst part of the skin disease was not having it. Rather, the worst part was the fact that since he had it, he was therefore labeled as unclean, untouchable, and unable to be anywhere near his community, his synagogue, or his family.

The law found in Leviticus 13 was clear: “The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ And he shall live alone, his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

If you had leprosy (which could have meant anything from a skin rash to actual Hansen’s disease) you lost everything – job, family, place in the community—everything<sup>iii</sup>.

And that is why the leper came to Jesus that day. He came because he had nowhere else to go and no one else to turn to. He had probably already been to his priest to see if the priest would declare him clean. But the priest knew what the Scripture said. And he believed it and that settled it. Therefore, the leper had no place in the religious community anymore and no choice about it either. Jesus was his last chance for healing and for restoration back into community. Jesus was his last chance for a future full of hope and love and relationships, rather than what he was currently facing - a future full of ostracism, isolation, and despair. “If you choose, you can make me clean,” the leper said, kneeling before Jesus. And his words made Jesus mad.

They made Jesus mad at a religious and social system that would look at that man suffering with an illness and declare that because he had it, then he was no longer worthy to be counted as human, as family, as a child of God. Jesus snorted in anger not at the man, but at the fact that the man had to come to him to begin with. Jesus was moved with anger because that leper had been tossed out and kept out by well-meaning religious types who were just trying to live what they thought the Bible said by carefully-building and scrupulously-preserving walls and boundaries.

But even though Jesus was mad, his anger did not throw him off track. He might have been angry with the powers and principalities of an unjust system cloaked in the clothes of religion, but he was not angry with the leper. Instead, Jesus decided then and there that enough was enough. Game on. And so he looked right into that man’s eyes and he said with deep conviction “I do choose. Be made clean.”

And with those words, Jesus touched him. He touched him. Now, we have to realize that Jesus’ action of touching that leper was a very big deal. His four disciples must have had eyes as wide as saucers at that point. You don’t touch a leper. No one touches a leper.

Why? Because once you do that, you, yourself, are unclean. And once you are unclean, then you can no longer go openly into towns, into communities, and into the religious spaces. Once you are unclean, then you are not supposed to be in contact with family or with friends. Once you are unclean, then you are supposed to be ostracized, isolated, and banished. So yes - Jesus touched that leper immediately making the leper clean. But by that very act of his healing touch, Jesus immediately rendered himself unclean.

He and the leper traded places. And as a result of that touch, that act of healing and restoration, Jesus became a marked man. For once the word got out, Jesus was forced to go back to the deserted place, back into hiding, away from the towns and villages and synagogues. Not because he became too popular. But because he had now taken the leper's place in the space of exclusion and uncleanness.

Jesus had now ended up on the wrong side of the tracks<sup>iv</sup> because of his intense emotional response. A response that viscerally propelled him from simply feeling compassion for the leper, into doing action on the leper's behalf. Jesus took that chance and made that choice. And I have to think that Jesus knew how dangerous his act would be. He had to know that the leper's liberation would provoke the beginning of the conflict and eventually lead to the cross. Jesus had to know that you did not just cross all the lines of religious norms and social mores without experiencing serious fall-out.

And I am certain that Jesus snorted with anger again as he realized that his healing touch would escalate the hostility against him. One would think that well-meaning religious types would be overwhelmed with gratitude for Jesus' work of restoration and healing. But Jesus knew that instead, they would be threatened and they would get even.

I have been keeping up with an interesting story in the newspaper over the last week. On February 7<sup>th</sup>, the Dallas Morning News printed a story about the building at 508 Park Avenue where the Blues' legend Robert Johnson recorded some of his work. The building is apparently on the city's code-enforcement list and could be facing demolition if something does not change with its upkeep and maintenance.

The writer quotes the owners of the building who place the blame squarely on the tenant across the street – First Presbyterian Church's Stewpot building. The owners say it is impossible to both fix up their property and to sell it because of the homeless people that gather out in front of The Stewpot.

As I read that story, I wondered about the reaction in the pastoral offices downtown at First Presbyterian. Specifically, I wondered about the reaction of the Associate Pastor Bruce Buchanan, who has spent the last 21 years overseeing community ministries and specifically, the Stewpot. I could just imagine Bruce reading that article and snorting in anger. I could imagine Bruce reading in between the lines of the article—hearing the distinct cadence of scapegoating; hearing the underlying tone of “Unclean, unclean.”

And I could just imagine how the social workers and the church volunteers and the formerly homeless clients shook their heads as they went about their daily cleaning and powerwashing of the sidewalks in front of that building, doing their best to minister to people whom most of us would rather live in a dwelling outside the camp, away from the community of clean, respectable, well-meaning citizens.

Last Friday I read Bruce's response in a “Letter to the Editor.” “The owners claim they are unable to find a buyer for their property due to the presence of The Stewpot and the homeless people it serves. It is a neat explanation to blame a derelict building on ‘derelicts.’ In their eyes,

the only people who actively choose their fate are the homeless, and the only victims are the owners...” Bruce went on to explain that he has never seen that property being maintained. Rather, he has watched it get boarded up and neglected. He ended his letter with this: “The Stewpot does not give up on people; that is our mission and we do it well. Why did the property owners give up on their building?”

And you can tell by some of the comments posted on the DMN website that Bruce’s words touched a nerve. You certainly can tell that his words did not sit well with some folks, indeed, that they made some people very angry. But my guess is that Bruce does not really care if people get angry with his defense of the Stewpot and its homeless clients. I think he expects it.

After all, you don’t just cross all the lines of social norms without experiencing serious fall-out. And that is exactly what happens at the Stewpot. They cross all kinds of lines, daily. They cross lines of race and culture and economics and religion as they do ministry. Furthermore, they even touch their homeless clients as they offer dental and medical care, as they have foot clinics where volunteers wash and bandage up clients’ feet. I hear that sometimes, they even hug one another at the Bible study or at the worship times. You just wonder if back in 1975, when a bedraggled homeless man showed up at the door of the church and asked the Associate Pastor for food, if that pastor looked into that man’s eyes and said “Enough is enough.” Game on. As followers of Jesus we must not just **feel** compassion for the people, we must **do something** on their behalf.

I do not think that Mark ever expected this story to be G-rated, non-offensive to our innocent, church going ears. On the contrary, I think that as Mark wrote down this interaction between Jesus and the leper, he hoped that it would offend us and cause us to get angry. But not angry at the leper. Rather, angry at the fact that he had to show up and ask us for food and restoration and inclusion in the first place.

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<sup>i</sup> Walton, Jon. “Jesus the Iconoclast,” preached at FPC NYC in Feb. 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> Charles, Gary.

<sup>iii</sup> London, Jeffrey. “The Laughing Barrel.” Found on [Lectionary.org](http://Lectionary.org)

<sup>iv</sup> A phrase found in the RevGalPals Tuesday Lectionary Leanings