

Are You Willing?

2 Kings 5:1-14

Mark 1:40-45

In his book, *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity*, Charles Swindoll tells this story:

Legend has it that a man was lost in the desert, just dying for a drink of water. He stumbled upon an old shack – a ram-shackled, windowless, roofless, weather-beaten old shack. He looked about this place and found a little shade from the heat of the desert sun. As he glanced around he saw a pump about fifteen feet away – an old, rusty water pump. He stumbled over to it, grabbed the handle, and began to pump up and down, up and down. Nothing came out.

Disappointed, he staggered back to the shack. Then he noticed off to the side an old jug. He looked at it, wiped away the dirt and dust, and read a message that said, “You have to prime the pump with all the water in this jug, my friend. P.S.: Be sure you fill the jug again before you leave.”

He popped the cork out of the jug and sure enough, it was almost full of water. Suddenly, he was faced with a decision. If he drank the water, he could live. Ah, but if he poured all the water in the old rusty pump, maybe it would yield fresh, cool water from down deep in the well, all the water he wanted.

He studied the possibility of both options. What should he do, pour it into the old pump and take a chance on fresh, cool water or drink what was in the old jug and ignore its message? Should he waste all the water on the hopes of those flimsy instructions written, no telling how long ago?

Reluctantly he poured all the water into the pump. Then he grabbed the handle and began to pump, squeak, squeak, squeak. Still nothing came out. Squeak, squeak, squeak. A little bit began to dribble out, then a small stream, and finally it gushed! To his relief fresh, cool water poured out of the rusty pump. Eagerly, he filled the jug and drank from it. He filled it another time and once again drank its refreshing contents.

Then he filled the jug for the next traveler. He filled it to the top, popped the cork back on, and added this little note, “Believe me, it really works. You have to give it all away before you can get anything back.”

This story reminded me a bit of Naaman. Naaman was given simple instructions on how to rid himself of the scourge of leprosy, but he was hesitant to follow through. I’m not sure what he thought the downside might be. It would appear that he was annoyed that Elisha had not come out to him personally and made a big show of announcing a cure. As a military hero he was probably used to grand gestures. Maybe simple instructions were seen as an insult, which might account for his pique. Perhaps he just didn’t have enough faith in Elisha, after all this was not Aram, but the conquered nation of Israel he had come to for assistance. For whatever reason, Naaman was reluctant to follow the instructions given.

Thankfully for him his servants prevailed upon him to give it a try, and after dunking himself in the Jordan he was cured.

Just as the traveler in the first story needed to follow the instructions to access fresh, cool water, so Naaman needed to follow the instructions to receive the

outcome he wanted. In both cases these men were acting in faith that the outcome they desired would come as a result of following those instructions.

In the story from Mark today, we meet another man living with the scourge of leprosy. He approaches Jesus and in faith asks for healing, but hedges his request by asking if Jesus would be willing to help him. Before we get to Jesus' response, I'd like to take a step back and look at what has happened and is happening in this story.

Jesus had very recently cast out unclean spirits from a man in the synagogue. This is the first healing detailed in Mark's gospel. From the synagogue Jesus and his friends travel to the house of Simon, where Simon's mother-in-law laid ill with a fever. Jesus took her by the hand and she was cured and began serving those in her house. These healings sparked a frenzy in the community and many people came to Jesus seeking healing for various diseases and for the casting out of demons.

Jesus tells his disciples at this point that they must go to other villages, since this is why he has come. He had a mission to bring hope and healing to the world through His words and His actions. So they go and Jesus preaches in the synagogues and heals even more people. By now news of the healing rabbi has spread throughout the countryside, so we are not surprised that in his travels Jesus encounters a man living with leprosy, someone seeking healing from this terrible disease. This was probably along the road somewhere, not in a town or village. We know this because anyone with leprosy was considered unclean and cast out of civil society. Those with leprosy were not allowed to even associate with their own family. It was a lonely, hard scrabble existence at best.

In the first century AD, people didn't have the Centers for Disease Control to explain to them what leprosy was, how it spread, or how to treat it. All they knew was that it spread through their communities, it was terribly debilitating, and the only way they knew to control the spread was to ostracize those suffering with the disease. If someone did recover, and there were some who did, they had to present themselves to the priests for an inspection and a proclamation that they could return to their homes, their jobs, and their communities. But no one ever touched a leper, not only for fear of contracting this awful disease and becoming unclean themselves, but to do so was unlawful.

In fact, if you were one of the unclean ones you had to shout to anyone approaching you that you were unclean. We are not told that the leper in this story announced that he was unclean, although it was probably obvious since leprosy produces nodules on the skin that would have been visible to passersby. What we do know is that in faith this man asked Jesus to heal him.

In the version of this story that I read this morning, it says that Jesus was "filled with compassion". That sounds like the Jesus we know. Caring deeply for the people he was sent to serve. However, in other versions it says that Jesus was "indignant" or "angry". That, too, is the Jesus we know. While Jesus took pity and showed compassion to those who were less fortunate, He was also indignant about a society that cast aside its members who did not meet the status quo. So whether in compassion or indignation, Jesus announces that he is willing and will make this man well.

Then Jesus does something that probably surprised his followers and even the man who asked for healing, Jesus touched him. He did not give instructions to go wash,

like Elisha had. He physically touched the leper. As a compassionate person, it was not surprising that Jesus responded to this man's request, what was surprising was that he actually touched him. Unlawful, unwise, unheard of, yet He did it. He responded to the faith of the man and healed him with his touch.

Just as in the story of Naaman, a healing happened without any grand gesture. Simply, someone had to be willing to offer help to someone else who had faith that healing would come. Then a dip in the river or a gentle touch brought the healing they needed. But Jesus, by his willing touch, did more than heal the leper. He also changed the social order. By his touch he upended the purity laws and overcame the control of the priests. By his touch he brought freedom to the man held captive by his disease. To all those who in faith came to him, he offered a freedom that they had never known before.

Leprosy isn't very common today, but we can still tell who the outcasts are in our society, can't we? We see them on the streets, the modern day unclean. When we are approached by those in need, those on the fringes like the lepers in our stories today, how do we respond? Are we willing to make that gesture, whether large or small, to help meet their need? And when we respond do we give our best or what we feel we will miss the least? I thought about this when Rod and I visited Mexico. Our host family, consisting of 7 people, squeezed themselves into two bedrooms, so that Rod, Lisai, and I could have a private bathroom and sleeping quarters in their home. Each morning they would go to the market to get fresh fruit and meat to feed us for breakfast. They were willing to do what they could to make our stay in their country a pleasant experience. They gave everything away, they gave us their best.

Jesus was willing and gave away his best to the leper – his healing power, just as he gave his best to all the others who came to him for healing. As His followers can we say that we are willing to give our best when we are asked to help another? Can others have faith that their requests will not fall on deaf ears? We are called to act as Jesus did, to say to the leper among us “I am willing.” Do we trust that Jesus is willing to work in us, so that we may willingly help others?

Like Jesus, are we indignant about societal views and practices that push people to the fringes because they are different from the accepted norm? Do we stand up and speak up for those less fortunate? In our country right now, there are many who are in need of help. Can we make our voices heard saying that we are willing to give our best?

The Apostle Paul reminds us that as followers of Christ we are to be willing. Hear what he writes in Romans 12:9-13:

... Hate what is evil (be indignant about oppression and mistreatment of any people group); cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves (always give your best, not what you will be least likely to miss). Never be lacking in zeal (always be ready to say “I am willing”), ... keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality (with all people).

What might we be able to accomplish today if we respond, “I am willing”? Will we strengthen the faith of those who ask for our help? What freedoms might we be able to provide? How might our world change when each of us, in the faith we have in Jesus, answers, “I am willing”?

As we go through this coming week, let us all be willing to answer the call of Jesus, to be His representatives in the world, offering hope and healing, by giving of ourselves to those in need. Trusting that as we “³⁸ give, it will be given to us. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into our laps; for the measure we give will be the measure we get back." **Luke 6:38**
(NRSV)

Prayer

We come before you like the leper on the road asking, have mercy on us, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion heal us.

Wash away our iniquity and cleanse us from our sins.

Create pure hearts in all of us, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within each of us.

Do not cast us from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from us.

Restore to us the joy of your salvation and grant us a willing spirit, to carry out your work in our world today.

In the faith that you hear our prayers, we ask this in the name of your blessed son.

AMEN

Lynne McMullan Allebach

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