

Unclean
2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1: 40-45

What comes to mind when you hear the word “unclean?” One might think of something that is dirty, that needs to be cleaned. It might bring to mind personal hygiene, of needing a shower, or it might remind us that we need to do some laundry. Regardless of what context, from this perspective, getting “clean” is a relatively simple problem with a simple solution. All we need to do is properly wash what is dirty, and it is restored.

Our scripture readings this morning present a different situation, one that isn't quite as simple. What do you do when another person, by definition, is judged to be “unclean.” When that label has nothing to do with how they care for their hygiene, or laundry, or living situation. How can you become clean when you are deemed untouchable due to situations entirely beyond your control?

In both our readings today, we are told that both characters are suffering from leprosy. Our initial reaction may be to equate that condition with our modern concept of Hansen's Disease, that results in skin lesions and over time often leads to loss of limbs. And certainly, in ancient times that definition was part of what was classified as leprosy. But, in the biblical context, any significant skin condition could lead to you being branded a leper. And in being labeled as such, you immediately lost all validity as a participating member of society. You could no longer live with your family in relationship with the rest of your community. You were thrust out into the wilder places outside of the villages and towns. You had to announce your diagnosis to any who came near, so that they could take a wide berth and avoid becoming contaminated and “unclean” themselves. Should someone come into contact with you could result in them being outcasts as well.

This is what Jesus confronted in our story today. He is approached by one such person. Someone who is outcast and “unclean.” Someone who should be avoiding contact with him, and whom he certainly should be avoiding himself. Yet when he cries out to Jesus for

healing...most likely from a safe distance to be in “compliance” with the rules of the day... Jesus shows a visceral, an emotional reaction. In our translation, we're told that Jesus “was filled with compassion” for the man. Clearly Matthew meant to relay a very strong reaction to the man. And who could blame him. Here was someone who had been suffering for some time - from a condition that the man had no control over. Lepers, those with a skin disease, were blemished and different from what was considered to be “normal” and “acceptable,” and were ostracized because of it. Jesus really shouldn't be even close enough to have a conversation with this man - doing so put himself at risk. Yet he chooses not to heal him passively from a distance but “:reached out his hand and touched the man” and heals him. With one act of compassion, he crosses the boundary of religious purity laws of the time and enters into the man’s space. He expresses his desire to help him, to make a difference in his life, to show compassion.

By healing him, he opens the way for him to be redeemed according to the social norms and religious law. He gives the man a choice, something he's not had up to this point: He can show himself to the religious authorities and be redeemed; He can find his place among the “normal” and be reintegrated back into society; He can keep quiet about what has transpired and rejoin society and become part of the system again; He can seek the easy way out like Naaman in our first reading today; He can follow the rules and expectations of the day, make his required donation, and then be about his business...

Or he can try to do something about it. He, like Jesus, can express anger at the injustice that system bestows on those who are different, who don't fit into the mold of what's “normal.” He can use his voice to proclaim that it doesn't have to be this way, that God offers us another way. He can offer his own testimony about how that different way has transformed his life. A way that offers love and compassion instead of callous exclusion. A way that is outside of what is considered “normal” and “right;” choosing to ally with the outcast over the “in” crowd. A choice Jesus has just solidified for himself.

Matthew tells us that the man's subsequent evangelism now keeps Jesus out of the towns and cities. But it's probably more a matter of his actions in this story that now drive Jesus to the countryside. Jesus has now physically touched one known as a leper. Word will have gotten around that he is now unclean as well. His identity as the Messiah is not known as much as he's known as just an unclean as a leper – especially in the eyes of the powers that be. He chose to be an outcast and unclean; to live a life outside and often in opposition to the system, to the “normal” way of things.

We have the same choice presented to us. While most of us probably haven't encountered many suffering from leprosy, or Hansen's disease in our own lives, I can guarantee we all have experiences with the “lepers” of today. Those who get a wide berth in the public spaces, those who look different or whose lives are lived differently from what is considered “normal” or the way it's “supposed to be done”. Those who get the sidelong looks, who generate the hushed whispers in the public square, or in the fellowship hall. We can choose to be “in” with the “right” crowd and exclude those who don't “fit the norm”...or we can join those on the outside and make our home among the outcasts and excluded.

Today's texts generate many questions for me, but not necessarily any answers. Are we willing to make that choice? Can we risk losing the safety and security of fitting in with the mainstream? Is our priority the “way we look”, the “performance we give” instead of who we care for and the ideals we fight for? Do we focus on income streams and attendance over the risk of stepping out in faith to places where “common sense” tells us we shouldn't be?

Our faith ancestors, the Anabaptists and the Pietists were those on the outside, those who didn't fit in. Can we be as bold? More than anything, the texts this week speak to the

strength of faith. Whether Naaman questioning the simplicity of a bath in the Jordan, or the leper choosing a path outside the norm, we have choices to make.

Will we follow Christ's example and choose the path that doesn't exclude, or will we cling to the rules and laws that stigmatize and scapegoat? I hope and pray that we all take time this week to ponder these questions, from our individual perspectives and from our perspective together. Are we clean and secure, or unclean and outcast? If we aren't where we should be, what can we do to get on the right path. May we choose wisely. Amen.