Mark 1:40-45

40 A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ 41Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’ 42Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.43After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 44saying to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.’ 45But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Christians Without Borders

1. The inside and the outside

An argument could be made that, in our 2000 year history, we as Christians were at the top of our game in the first two hundred years after the resurrection. The New Testament gives us a glimpse of some of the early churches and some of the events taking place at that time – the Epistles and the book of Acts tell us about the conflicts and persecutions. We have other early writings that further fill in the picture. On the bright side, we see that Jesus’ ministry was continuing – the news of the resurrection was travelling all around the known world, east to Persia and India, south into Africa, north into Europe. Churches were sprouting up everywhere, despite of the fact that the Jewish religious authorities had expelled the Christians from synagogues and many churches were enduring persecution. Churches were not at all like what we experience today with stained glass and steeples and bells and organs and choir lofts; people met in houses and often met in secret. The Christian faith was not the religion of the rich and powerful; great leaders did not tout their belief in Jesus Christ. Most congregations were made up of the poor and the sick and the uneducated and the outcast and the slaves. Once in awhile someone wealthy of influential converted to the faith, but for the most part, we were a very motley crew.

Everything changed when the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be not only legal but the state religion as well. Soon Christianity would become the religion of the rich and powerful as well as the religion of the poor and downtrodden. The Christian faith became fashionable and less dangerous, so more of the rich and famous and powerful embraced the faith. I have nothing against the rich and powerful – I wouldn’t mind being either – but too often wealth and power distract us from living a life of faith. Wealth and power can corrupt the human soul, and while many a wealthy and powerful Christian used his or her wealth and power to improve the condition of the poor and to strengthen the community, others used their wealth and power to build armies to expand the boundaries of Christiandom or simply to surround themselves with luxury. It reached a point where anyone who was not a Christian according to the criteria established by the authorities was persecuted, their wealth confiscated. So many Jews were forced to convert or risk losing life and property. Then such injustice was levied against any Christian who failed to pledge their allegiance to the Church. The shoe was on the other foot; The church was now guilty of persecuting those outside the church. The outsiders were now the insiders.

This distinction between “insiders” and “outsiders” is something we’re all familiar with. “Inside trading” is a kind of transaction that’s based on information that is available to a privileged few. A person’s “inner circle” of friends or advisors is a group of people who we would say have a greater influence over that person’s decisions. The “in” crowd is the group who are more popular, more likely to be invited to a party. College students perform extreme and embarrassing stunts to get “in” to a fraternity or sorority. Teenagers break laws and even kill people to get “in” to a gang. There are clubs and organizations where only members are allowed “in.” We gain a feeling of privilege and security when we are “in” with the “right” people. Everyone is prone to fall victim to this sort of thinking. Even within Jesus own group of disciples, there was a struggle to be more “in” with Jesus; they argued over who would sit at his right and left once Jesus came to power. Paul faced the same problems in some of his churches as some members felt more privileged or more righteous than others.

1. Jesus is neither in nor out

And so both of today’s readings hold lessons for us on how God utterly defies that tendency we have to distinguish ourselves from one another. God is neither “in” nor “out,” In our Old Testament reading, we find God acting to heal Naaman, a Aramenian general, an enemy of Israel – someone on the outside – who also happens to be quite wealthy and powerful – someone privileged who we might say is on the inside. God works through a Israelite girl who has been taken captive and enslaved by the Aramenians in order to lead Naaman to the prophet Elisha to be healed. God uses the outsiders to help the insiders. And even when Naaman in all his pomp and glory feels snubbed by the prophet Elisha, his slaves, the outsiders, are the ones who persuade him to do as the prophet told him, and thus be healed.

And we find the same tendency in Jesus *not* to distinguish between people in today’s Gospel reading, although it may be harder for us to see at first. I described to you already how a person with leprosy lived in Jesus’ day – he or she had to wear rags, had to live outside the city walls, had to declare “unclean!” as people passed by them. The only chance to return to a normal life was to be cleansed, and that was to be done by a priest. For this to happen, a priest had to come to the person with leprosy and begin a ritual cleansing. My guess is that many lepers faced a Catch-22; they required the attention of a priest to heal them, but they were forbidden from going into the town to find the priest, and they were forbidden from speaking to people to ask for a priest. There were completely at the mercy of the priest. I imagine the anguish that many people with leprosy must have felt as days, weeks, months passed without any assistance from a priest.

The person who comes to Jesus in today’s lesson must have felt this anguish. Though he was prohibited from approaching people, he nonetheless approaches Jesus, defying the law. And though Jesus is not a priest, he nonetheless gives Jesus that same stature by telling him that if he so desires he can make this man clean. Jesus is this man’s only chance.

And notice what Jesus does. Jesus doesn’t just wave his hands in the air and declare this man clean. He doesn’t tell him to go wash in the Jordan River seven times. He could have cleansed him in these ways. But Jesus stretches out his hand and *touches* the man. He *touches a person with leprosy.* That goes beyond cleansing, and it is perhaps the reason that Jesus will no longer be able to go into the towns to proclaim his message. It may be the reason why Jesus sternly warns the man NOT to mention what happened to anyone. As I mentioned last week, Jesus considered his message to be far more important than the healing ministry that he had started, and now he would only be able to preach outside the city.

Why was it so important for Jesus to reach out and touch this man? He had hoped that the man would not mention that he touched him, but why take the chance? Was he wrong to trust that this man would not say anything about this cleansing? Was he wrong to take such a chance?

Whenever Jesus does something or says something that doesn’t make sense to us, it’s usually a reason for us to pay attention to it because it helps us to see the difference between the way God thinks and acts and the way we think and act. In touching a man with leprosy, Jesus is not only making a connection with the outsider; he is expressing the will to become vulnerable – perfect love is perfect vulnerability. It doesn’t seek to protect itself. It doesn’t seek to preserve its “insider” status. It’s as the hymn says:

In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north

But one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.

Jesus took a chance with this man as he takes a chance with everyone who ever comes to him. Jesus is making it clear that he is willing to suffer the consequences for his actions, just as his death on the cross shows his willingness to suffer and die for all of us. From this time forward Jesus will no longer be able to enter villages and towns openly as he’s now been contaminated. Jesus is not choosing to be on the outside; rather it’s the people around him that have placed him there.

1. What boundaries do you recognize?

So who are you afraid to touch? Is there someone, an individual or a type of person, who you believe may contaminate you, who you want to keep outside of the community? Remember that Jesus is now in that person’s place, and by excluding one person you are excluding Christ. If you sometimes feel that Jesus is absent from your life, somehow deaf to your cries or blind to your needs, perhaps it’s because we’re not letting him into our community. He’s stuck outside of town not because he’s chosen to dwell there but because that’s where we want him to stay.

It can take time to rid ourselves of these fears, but we can start today. It can start with someone you know personally, someone who is not part of your “in” crowd, someone who you feel embarrassed to hang out with. Hang out with him. It may be someone whose politics or religion may be completely foreign to you. Talk to them. Speaking to them, hanging out with them does not mean you have to agree with them or become like them. Jesus didn’t become a leper by touching a leper, but he showed a willingness to suffer what they suffered, to be rejected and cast out. And if we walk in someone else’s shoes for a little while, we may learn that we have more in common with them. By showing that you are willing to be vulnerable, that you are not so intent on staying where it’s safe, others may recognize Christ’s perfect and vulnerable love working in you.