

Following the Compassionate Christ

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30;
1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In his book, *Sowing Seeds of Faith in a World Gone Bonkers*, Larry Davies tells about an incident when he was pressed for time checking out at a supermarket. Seeing a near empty line, he pushed his cart in and found himself waiting behind a twenty-something woman with a basket containing twenty jars of baby food (you could tell he was in a hurry because he counted them). There was nothing else in her basket. Davies had it made. He would soon be out of the store in record time.

Then the clerk took the woman's check for seven dollars and forty-three cents, efficiently typed in the numbers, and slid the check in the proper slot on the register. At this point the cash drawer was supposed to pop open and a receipt printed. But not this time.

The checkout clerk called for the manager. "Oh no!" thought Davies. "Not another delay. I'm in a hurry and now the cash register breaks."

When the manager arrived, however, he didn't even look at the cash register. Instead he picked up the check and began to talk to the customer. Davies could feel the muscles in his stomach tighten as the reality of what was happening struck him. The check for seven dollars and forty-three cents was no good and the manager was quietly saying that she could not buy her baby food there.

The clerk quickly set aside the baby food, closed her account and began to ring up Davies' purchases. "She should manage her money better!" Davies spluttered to himself while leaving the store. "She's probably an alcoholic or a drug addict or something." But that wouldn't erase the picture in his mind of those jars of baby food sitting in that supermarket basket.

Davies writes, "At this point, I want to finish the story by writing how I approached the manager and offered to pay for the baby food. It was the Christian and right thing to do. I don't have much money, but I can afford seven dollars and forty-three cents. Instead, hiding my light under a bowl, I turned my head and walked away. There are no acceptable excuses. I had a great opportunity to help someone and I walked away."

In the gospel reading Jesus is confronted by a leper from whom He might easily have walked away but instead, He found a great opportunity.

Leprosy in the time of Jesus wasn't just a health problem; it was a dreaded social disease. It was considered to be a curse from God. The consequences were far more deadly than just being physical. Besides having to look forward to years of suffering and disfigurement, as well as an early death, lepers were ostracized by Jewish law.

The writer of Leviticus spelled it out in a sentence of condemnation: “He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.” The lepers had to go with “rent clothes, disheveled hair, and with a covering upon his upper lip.” And as they went were required to cry out, “Unclean, unclean.”

A leper could not enter the Temple, or go into Jerusalem or into any walled city; the penalty for doing so was forty lashes. But it was worse. Any person – any person – who had contact with a leper was defiled. If a leper so much as put his head inside a house, everything in it became unclean, even to the beams of the roof. It was forbidden to greet a leper in an open place. No one might stand nearer to a leper than four feet; and if the wind was blowing from him in the direction of the other person, the leper was required to be at least fifteen feet away.

A certain Rabbi Meir would not even eat an egg bought in a street where a leper had walked. Another Rabbi boasted that he always flung stones at lepers to keep them away. Other Rabbis hid themselves, or took to their heels and ran whenever a leper appeared, even in the distance. And so lived the supposedly righteous of God.

No disease was as isolating as leprosy. A miracle, repentance and a total conversion of heart were expected to precede any "cure." In other words, in the very unlikely event that a person was cured or they experienced a remission of the disease, they still had to go through a lengthy ritual cleansing and purging of sin before they would be re-admitted to society.

Because so few ever went into remission or were cured, they were considered to be continual and persistent and obdurate sinners. A leper had no right to expect any medical care, nor the embrace of a loving community. Such sinners were even believed to be beyond God's embrace.

This leper, who approaches Jesus, breaks all the boundaries of culture, convention, and religion. He approaches Jesus and kneels before Him and says, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Jesus' response is electrifying. He immediately and emphatically rejects all the human barriers and rules that come between this man and Himself.

The version of the story we read in our New Testament this morning could not be more mild or milquetoast. Jesus, it says, was “moved with pity.” No He wasn't. He was repulsed; He was angered; He was furious! Let me give you a little lesson in Greek. (They told us in seminary we were never allowed to do this, so I'm going to break the rules and tell you.) The Greek verb is *splagchinizomai*, and it means that His intestines were in a churned and twisted state. This was no superficial pity. Jesus was angered and revolted by the self-righteous condemnation imposed on lepers and outcasts like them by the people of so-called faith in God. But the question really is, beloved: Who would dare to separate people from the power, and the presence, and the embrace of God?

Without hesitation Jesus reaches out and touches the leper, healing him, and putting Himself at risk of being thrust into a leper colony, because He's already defiled. Rather than being disgusted or even terrified at the request of the leper for assistance, He acts, and in doing so stresses His determination to do what no one else would have believed possible. He doesn't only cure a disease when he touches this man, but He performs a spiritual act and a social cure, as well. For in touching the man Jesus breaks the moral and religious taboos that the church and people held about lepers, and openly and publicly welcomes the man back into the community. Jesus then calls the man to fulfill the Mosaic

statute and in so doing, challenges the religious authorities and His peers to see that God's healing grace is available to any and to all, no matter what anybody thinks or teaches or says.

What then, beloved, of our treatment of those we consider outcast? Of those we would ostracize in our day and age? Who are those we have declared, with the best of piety and the greatest of intentions, "lepers," outcasts, those inadmissible to the community of faith? Who are they?

We know only too well who they are. And if and when we reach out to them as Christ reached out to this leper, we do so at the risk of a terrible public price, and find ourselves marginalized.

For Jesus, according to Mark's account, the cost was considerable. The end of the story finds Him once more besieged. Earlier He fled Capernaum because "the whole city" was at His doorstep. Now no town offers Him refuge, and He must stay in the country. The risk of us reaching out with the compassion of Christ is to find ourselves marginalized by many of the churches and denominations and religious pundits in our country. But the people, Mark tells us, the people "Came to Him from every quarter."

Herein, beloved, lies the primary and ultimate scandal of our faith. The power of our faith resides in the amazing love of God that will not devote itself to our ends, nor to our conventions, nor to anyone's peace of mind. Its one profound concern is with the faith in our hearts, that there may be enough of it to make possible whatever it is God hopes for us to do. And that, for so many people these days, is the problem with Jesus and those who would dare follow Him. He calls for far too much compassion. If He's going to go on and accept everybody like this without any standards, then He calls for a compassion easy to forgive, easy to accept people's shortcomings, and easy to accept the outcast and the ostracized. But if we forget that, beloved, if we forget that is the way He does reach out; if we forget that if Christ were not so easy with His compassion none of us – not one of us – would stand a chance of salvation. If He were not easy to forgive, if He were not willing to accept people's shortcomings, if He were not willing to do for us what we ought to but cannot do for ourselves, all of us, like the lepers, would be on the outside looking in.

Pastor Duane Windemiller tells about years ago conducting a funeral at a church in New Hampshire. The funeral was for an old family physician who had lived 102 years. A woman stood up in the middle of the service and, with tears making tracks down her face, said, "Whenever we heard his old Model T turning into our yard, we started to get better."

May that be the way people remember us and our Christ-like compassion; that just the sight of us would speak of God's forgiveness and Christ's salvation.

Oh, and Davies? Davies resolved that he would never walk away from someone he might help given the opportunity.

Amen.

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