

The Good News as told by Mark (4)

Jesus introduces his kingdom (1)

A kingdom of compassion

Mark 1:40-45

Legalistic religion stalks the steps of Jesus as he preaches in the synagogues of the cities of Galilee. Like two large ships on a crash course with no time for turning, a collision is inevitable. His Good News challenges the drudgery of the Law; his authority threatens the legitimacy of the scribes; and his concern for human need tears at the traditions of established religion. It happens so naturally and so innocently. When Jesus takes compassion upon a leper and touches him, he is propelled into an era of contending for the truth against a dead orthodoxy and deadly opponents.

Relive the scene with Jesus when the leper comes to him, violating the taboos by begging, kneeling and speaking to him, “If you are willing, you can make me clean” (Mk 2:40). These are the words of a person with one last desperate hope. Even then, with a life history of disappointment, he qualifies his pleading with the contingency, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

Here is the early and yet ultimate test of the feelings of Jesus. During his ministry, he will meet the full range of physical needs – blindness, blood disease, epilepsy, palsy, paralysis, and even insanity. But of all these diseases, leprosy is the symbol of hopelessness. A leper is not only considered physically incurable, but they also suffers under social rejection and spiritual condemnation. Never forget, Jesus hears the scum of the earth cry out, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

Leprosy as the most hopeless of all diseases. Physically, leprosy seems incurable because it reverses the pain process. Most diseases have pain as an early warning system that helps in healing. Leprosy is just the opposite. The disease destroys the signal system for pain, leaving the body without its natural protection against self-destruction. A leper is burned, cut, and broken without the warning of pain. Skin falls off, fingers, arms, toes, and legs die and drop away in defiance of the normal process of the body to heal itself. In the absence of pain, the leper loses the hope of healing.

Leprosy is also a hopeless social disease. Because lepers are so grotesque, respectable society labels them contagious and sends them into exile. It is one thing to be condemned to die, but it is quite another thing to die in isolation. Lepers are to cry out, “Unclean, Unclean,” wherever they walk. Decent people avoid the contamination of even their shadows.

Here is the test. Before Jesus’ ministry has gained full momentum, he meets a leper who cries out from the outer edge of human need, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.” What will Jesus do? If he can love, touch, and heal a leper, everyone else has hope. What will Jesus do?

Mark leaves no doubt about Jesus’ response. As Peter remembers it: “Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man, ‘I am willing,’ he said, ‘Be clean!’” (Mk 1:41).

To match the most difficult of human needs, Jesus responds with the deepest of human feelings. As with us, Jesus knows the full range of human emotion. He knows cheer, anger, disappointment, laughter, sighing, displeasure, surprise, impatience, exhilaration, and depression. Among all of these feelings, compassion stands out as the deepest of all human emotions and as the truest expression of the heart of Jesus. The word ‘compassion’ derives from the same Greek word that means ‘viscera, bowels, intestines,’ or in our vernacular, ‘guts’. When we read that Jesus is moved with compassion, it means that he feels himself so deeply into the sufferings of the leper that it is just as if he himself is suffering as a leper. Jesus is not moved with pity – that is too condescending; not with sympathy – that is too superficial; not even with empathy – that is too distant. Not just mind for mind, hand for hand, or even heart for heart, but stomach for stomach, blood for blood, gut for gut, Jesus feels his way into the leper’s needs.

Jesus reaches out and touches the leper! Violating every medical warning and risking every social and religious taboo, Jesus lets the leper know that he will take his place – not just in the risk of physical contagion, but in social and religious too.

Jesus has a choice to make. Will he respond to the leper at the risk of limiting his ministry and prematurely provoking the opposition of the establishment? Or will he reject the leper at the risk of losing the purpose for which he has come, “Not ... to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45)? Jesus chooses the leper, but not without a price. Instead of presenting himself to the priest and entering the ritual for cleansing, the leper becomes a one-man whirlwind telling the story of his cleansing wherever he goes. Jesus has to give up part of his ministry in the city for the sake of a single soul. From now on, the people will have to come to him in out-of-the-way, desert places. More than that, the leper’s testimony begins the legal opposition to Jesus. Conflict now becomes his never-ending and ever-escalating fact of life.

Amen

Knighton Baptist Church (Online)

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