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Newport News, Virginia  
February 15, 2009

*The Power to Bless*  
Mark 1:40-45

If you see the healing of a Leper in today's gospel text as just another healing, then you've missed Mark's point. It was the third healing. The first healing occurred at the synagogue where Jesus had gone to listen to the reading of scripture and enter into discussion of the text with the other Jewish males. A man with an "unclean spirit" (demon possessed or emotionally ill) cried out to him, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" Jesus called the "spirit" to come out of him. In doing so, he broke a Sabbath rule.

His second healing occurred later that same day—still on the Sabbath—when he took Simon Peter's mother-in-law, sick in bed with a fever, by the hand and healed her. She then began preparing a meal and serving Jesus and the four disciples, also breaking a law of the Sabbath. After sundown when Sabbath was over, many people gathered outside Simon's house ready to be touch by the healing personality of Jesus.

The third healing sited in this first chapter of Mark occurs in the countryside when a person with leprosy approached Jesus. "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus healing has progressed from the synagogue to a house to the out-of-doors.

If you let this healing pass as only another of many healings sited in the gospels, you miss the most important message of today's text. This healing is included because it is a marginalized person being healed—a leper. The event occurred in the open spaces because a person with this illness was not permitted at the synagogue (because such a one was considered ritually / religiously unclean), and it occurred not in a house because a leper was considered socially unclean, separating such persons from the tables of their family and friends.

Aren't the words interesting? "If you choose..." The average person would keep his or her distance in order to avoid being classified "unclean" himself. Remember, germs had not been discovered at that time in history. Those sick, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally, were seen as either being

possessed by a demon or having sinned against God—hence, their condition. Having been liberated by Jesus of her fever on the Sabbath, Simon’s mother-in-law felt liberated from some of the restrictions of the Sabbath and began “serving.” Technically, she could be considered the first deacon, since diaconate is a word meaning to get dust on your feet as you wait on others at a table. She was the first deacon of the Jesus followers and the first deacon was a female.

Jesus responded to the leper’s plea of “If you choose, you can make me clean” with “I choose.” Jesus touched him, becoming unclean himself. He then told the healed leper to tell no one, but to go to the priest and let himself be declared religiously clean. Instead, the leper disobeyed Jesus and became an itinerate preacher. His experience of liberation and the Kingdom of God was more important than the power of the priest. He began to proclaim victory over the law of the leper’s exclusion. Because Jesus is now unclean after having touched the leper, he can no longer go into town openly and stays out in the countryside.<sup>1</sup>

When I first began ministry in 1973 the burning issues in the church were race and gender. I was called to my first church in Blackville, South Carolina (the “Big Brick” as some non-members referred to it). The church had just ordained a female to their diaconate—the first Southern Baptist Church in South Carolina to do so. In relation to racial issues, I had already determined that my calling to almost any church in the South would be a call to a church that needed to grow beyond racial discrimination. So, the topic of race became a “Don’t ask, don’t tell” approach for both me and their Pastor Search Committee. Knowing they had been a leader in overcoming gender discrimination, I had hopes that this progressive spirit would be alive where racial tensions were concerned.

During my first Deacons’ Meeting, one of the deacons, Willie McCormack, said, “Pastor, I don’t know whether anyone has talked to you about our policy on blacks worshipping at First Baptist. If not, doing so might be helpful for you and us.” (Racial tensions were high in the South during the 60s and 70s and many white churches feared that African Americans would force integration in churches.) I welcomed the conversation. Willie then spoke on behalf of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ofelia Ortega, “Theological Perspective” on Mark 1:40-45 from *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press: 2008), 356-360.

deacons telling me that this spiritual and administrative body had agreed to a plan of action in which any blacks desiring to worship at First Baptist would be seated.

“I’m glad to hear that,” I responded.

“However,” another deacon carefully continued, “we deacons, from the front steps, are to discourage their participation with us.”

A third deacon continued, “and, if they are insistent, we are to seat them on the front row and the service is to be concluded with a prayer following your sermon with no ‘Invitation Hymn.’”

“I see,” was the only thing I could think to say.

On several occasions, close black friends of deceased members were welcomed at funeral services. Word spread quickly though the community one year when the local Methodist minister and I were on the program at Jefferson Davis Academy’s graduation exercises. We didn’t stand for the singing of “Dixie,” their alma mater.

A few years later, the Rev. Aaron Bush, the African-American pastor of the Macedonia Baptist Church and state president of the NAACP, called on me. He told me he wanted me to preach at the dedication service of their new building. I thanked him for the high compliment, told him that I would, but first wanted to let my Deacon Board know of his invitation.

He said, “I want your choir to sing at the service, also.”

I told him I would pass his invitation on the choir and get back with him soon. “No,” Aaron responded. “You have to tell them what they are going to do.”

“I don’t like the feeling of manipulation, Aaron,” I responded. “White churches function differently than black churches in that regard. The choir will need to make its own decision. I would want my coming to preach and their coming to sing to be something positive for *both* churches. Only then, will it be a good thing.”

Macedonia’s dedication day and First Baptist’s strong involvement through the choir, many members’ participation, and my being the guest preacher was an important day for the community, in addition to being important to two sister churches. But, that was in the 1970s.

Who would be the marginalized citizens today? Who would be the leper in Mark's story today? A gay and lesbian? An American Muslim? A chemically addicted person?

I spent a summer on the streets of New York City during my college years. After working with children and street gangs during the day in Greenpoint Brooklyn, I would go into Manhattan and often spent time on Bowery Street, talking with the homeless. Most of them were addicted to alcohol. They needed friends, too. Most were from some other city or state, had been overcome by their addiction while in the City and were, in a sense, trapped on the streets. Herb Manard was the Director of the Bowery Chapel and a friend. They would feed anyone following a chapel service. Those who wanted to get off their addiction were invited to begin their program.

During my first semester of a Clinical Pastoral Internship at Georgia Baptist Medical Center in the 1990s, I was assigned to the AIDS floor. Such a floor didn't exist officially, but, the third floor of the old wing was the treatment area of patients who were HIV+. Most of them were male, but the patients also included women infected by their husbands or infected from a blood transfusion. Leading a seminar on "AIDS in the Workplace" at the University of Georgia for Chamber of Commerce Executives, I was astounded at the false fear of community leaders who avoided using phones or toilets shared by AIDS victims, or that being in the same room with someone HIV+ would lead to their own infection.

Mark's story in today's gospel is far more powerful than we might first think it to be. Everyone of us has the power to bless, whether it is a small child needing encouragement or a friend who has just lost a job.

Last Thursday, sixteen other presbytery ministers and I began a fourteen-month project focusing on "Growing Healthy Churches." I was invited to participate because Hilton is one of the seventeen growing Presbyterian Churches in the presbytery. The process will include reading and discussing about fifteen books together and committing to small group support. In the opening session, we watched a Paul Borden DVD presentation. His presentation was consistent with what I heard from Diana Butler Bass's presentation on the first of "Ten Signpost of Renewal" at my January continuing education

conference. (Her lectures were a synopsis of a Lilly Endowment research project with vital, healthy mainline churches.) It was consistent with Christian Schwarz's "Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches." "Hospitality" is the term Bass used for her first signpost. "Loving Relationships" is the phrase Schwarz used for his eighth characteristic. Borden expressed it this way: "People are looking for more than friendliness in our world; they are looking for friends." What is the difference? Friendliness provides a smile, the nod of a head, or a "hello." A friend extends a hand that has the power to bless and heal. Real friendships set you free to be your best self.

All three studies discounted the differences in theology and worship styles. All three recognized traits, characteristics, and signposts of health and growth. To arrive at determining the degree of this important characteristic, the studies were interested in information like, "How much time do members spend with each other outside of official church-sponsored events?" "How often do they invite each other over for coffee or a meal?" "How generous is the church in doling out compliments?" "How much laughter is there in the church?"<sup>2</sup> Practical love endows a church with a much greater magnetic power than all the marketing efforts of this world. Schwarz compares marketing the church to artificial flowers—they may look deceptively real, but they have no fragrance. Real love spreads a mysterious scent that few can resist.

How long has it been since you invited new acquaintances into your home? How long since new circles of friendships were formed. Developing new relationships is often met with resistance. What do we resist? We resist the loss of that which is comfortable, of what provides us with status, and what enables us to have influence, and what makes us significant.

The heart of Benedictine spirituality is hospitality.<sup>3</sup> It changes both the host and the guest. It is the power of "welcoming love." Hospitality is not a recruitment strategy or program designed to manipulate strangers into church membership. It is a central practice of the Christian faith—something Christians are called to do for the sake of that thing itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Schwarz, *The ABCs of Natural Church Development* (ChurchSmart Resources: 1998), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (HarperCollins: 2006), 84.

Today's gospel's story is barely about a healing. It is more about the forming of a new human group—the church. It is about overcoming the exclusion system that reigned in the religious atmosphere of Jesus' time. As a result of Jesus' radical invitation to the kingdom, the leper becomes the first of the evangelists, proclaiming the good news of social liberation and the experience of the abundant life he found in Jesus' friendship. AMEN.

#### **1 Corinthians 9:24-27**

24Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.25Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one.26So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air;27but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

#### **Mark 1:40-45**

40A 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.