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Mark 1: 40-45
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This reading gave me the perfect opportunity to point out to you those who we still place on the margins; to compare the lepers of ancient times with the lepers of today. Don't fool yourself, we still have them; those on the outside of the rest of society. I could tell you countless stories of people with HIV who have endured degrading commentary and inhumane treatment. I could have told you about the many prostitutes and drug dealers that I have met in my past working in the social service agency where I worked before going into ministry. Stories of very real people in very real situations of being placed outside of the community due to their particular leprosy. But instead I want to talk to you about ancient times and how this story has such relevance to us still today on many levels.

This is one of those stories that many of us have based our whole Christian belief around. Jesus can heal us of our diseases; if only we have faith, if only we truly believe, if only we prayed harder, if only...you fill it in. What is the cost of healing? What is it that we expect from God when we ask for healing? What did the people expect of Jesus when they found out about his ability to cleanse the leper? These are all good questions but in the end of this particular reading, after we study what this story is really telling us our question may be this, "Does our response to God show how we follow God or does it drive God away?"

"Does our response to God show how we follow God or does it drive God away?"

To understand the question before us we have to truly understand the social context from which this story originates. We have to put ourselves into antiquity, we cannot think with our modern minds and our beliefs of medical advancement giving everyone a better quality of life even in sickness. We must recognise that in Jesus time medical issues were a response to your religious life only, period, end of story. If you did all your rituals, all your sacrifices; if you lived according to the laws of the Jewish people regarding food, clothing, etc. you will be fine. If you are not fine then it is because you did something wrong in your religious life.

The fear that was attached to that way of thinking caused outrageous reactions from the public sector, which by the way was everyone's business. If you had a rash everyone knew it and you were deemed unclean.

Leprosy in ancient times was any skin condition from acne to an allergic reaction causing hives or a rash. It was any marking of the skin that caused bumps or deformities, and it was a visible marking that you were unclean. As a result of this the laws of Israel as written in Leviticus 13: 45-46 stated that you were "to wear torn clothes and let your hair be dishevelled; and you were to cover your upper lip and call out "unclean, unclean" as you approached people." Leviticus also states that "the leper shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp."

Living outside the camp meant that you were put outside the city walls. Lepers often lived in the garbage dumps that were outside the walls or in cemeteries. Some lived in isolation in caves in the side of hills and cliffs. They were allowed to beg at the city gate however. It was not unusual to find lepers band together to form their own type of community with one another.

So now that we have an understanding of what it is to be a leper let's play out the scenario of the story. The leper comes before Jesus begging for help with his condition; but instead of his begging being submissive and apologetic he has an air of confidence about him when he says, "If you choose, you can make me clean." In other words, it's up to you, I know you can do it but you must choose to do it.

Have you noticed that Jesus never heals anyone without them asking for it? In some way Jesus has to have permission from the ill person or their loved ones first. He doesn't just go around willy-nilly healing whether they want it or not, there is no assumption made that they would want to be healed; permission is granted through their request of God.

Jesus answers the man but rather than saying "be healed" he says "Be made clean" which in the literal translation of the text literally means, "be washed". Ah ha, you might be saying to yourself, this is where our gospel reading and our First Testament reading come together. Remember Naaman? He was told to go and wash himself in the Jordan, be made clean, be washed; and where Elisha's touch was not immediate the touch of Jesus is. These two stories both show more than just a physical healing, they show a social healing as well.

Richard Ascough writes in his book "Miracles of Jesus", "By touching the leper, Jesus not only heals him, he shows a willingness to flout societal opinion and Jewish law. Jesus considers the man to be fully human even in his unclean state."

It is here that this story takes another turn. You see for him to be taken back into the community Jewish law requires the man to go to the priest and show himself to be "clean". He is then required by the priest to offer up the appropriate sacrifices and then he would be deemed clean and able to return to the community. Jesus knew this law of course and so instructs the man to go show himself to the priests; but he asks the man not to tell anyone how he was made clean. Don't you find it odd that Jesus wouldn't want it to be public knowledge of the work he was doing? Aren't we under the impression that we are to go tell everyone about the miracles of Jesus? Why would he not want this man to tell?

Of course the man cannot contain himself. In his joy and over exuberance he tells everyone he meets. Let's face it, he's in the moment. The most wonderful thing has happened and he wants everyone to know. Can you blame him really?

It is because of this man's proclamations of what Jesus can do that we ask ourselves the question I asked at the beginning, "Does our response to God show how we follow God or does it drive God away?" You see, Jesus could no longer enter cities and towns, he was so swamped with people that he now had to stay on the outside of the cities and although he continued to do his healing work he was restricted in his movement. And so we see what is called the reversal of fortunes, the leper who was once marginalized and unable to enter the city and walk the streets now has the freedom to walk about, unnoticed and a whole part of society and the healer is put on the outside.

"Does our response to God show how we follow God or does it drive God away?" Once we get what we want, do we continue to follow God or do we drive God away?

In this story of healing Jesus never mentions the man's spiritual life, this entire story is around his social reintegration. Jesus' willingness to reach out to those marginalized and outcast and to touch them and reintegrate them back into society is where we come in. We are not able to heal in the same way that Jesus did however we can and in fact we are called, to reach out to those on the fringes, those marginalized, and those needing reintegration and to bring them back into the community.

There is also a warning in this story for us and it has to do with striking bargains with God. We find ourselves bargaining with God for that new job, that healing, that complete safety with the promise that we will do better, we will come to church, we will do whatever it takes; we look for big things that we think God would want us to do when in fact God asks us to do simple things that we ignore like go complete the ritual that will return you to society without any fanfare. Too many of us respond like the leper by returning to our lives free of our particular leprosy but unwilling to reach out to others on the margins.

Do we run and proclaim when we are asked to follow and obey?

Does our response to God show how we follow God or does it drive God away?

Amen