

Mark 1: 40-45

Alive, But.....

- . Remember the classic TV show “Golden Girls”?
- . Four women share a home; eldest, Sophia, is from Sicily, She often recalls stories of her homeland, and says “picture this”...
- . So, picture this: The ancient ME, probably Syria or Palestine; a solitary figure approaches.

He was alive, but, in a way, lived a walking death. His clothes, once clean and intact, are now soiled and deliberately torn. His skin, once bronzed and smooth, is now pale and decomposing. Once, a son of Israel who broke bread with his family and his people, is now isolated and alone.

The man in today’s scripture suffers from leprosy. In antiquity, leprosy was described any kind of skin disease characterized by lesions or welts. The presence of leprosy was declared by a priest, and could include anything from severe acne to cowpox to psoriasis. True leprosy, now called Hansen’s disease, was a dreaded disease then and still is. Caused by a bacterial “cousin” of tuberculosis, it is still found in Asia, India, Egypt, Africa, and even parts of the southern U.S. Due to the chemical nature of the bacteria, the infection is difficult to treat.

Untreated, leprosy lasts about 6-9 years until a painful death finally ensues. It disfigures victims by dissolving skin cells of the fingers, toes and the face, and by attacking the nerves. It is contagious, and spreads through bodily fluids of an infected person.

He was alive, but lived a kind of walking death. Leprosy laws required the victim to be isolated from society, accompanied by tearing of the clothes, and disheveling of one’s hair to mimic the appearance of a dead person. Lepers were required to cry out “unclean” if the leprous person saw another person. Often a leper’s family held funeral rites for them, just as if they though they were actually dead. Laws also required for a leper to remain 50 feet away from other non-infected people, so like most lepers, the man in our story dwells alone in a cave outside of town.

Today's scripture is one of ten healing stories in Mark's Gospel in which an illness, death, or a chronic condition is reversed. In early chapter 1 of Mark, Jesus is affirmed as the Son of God at his baptism. He's anointed by the Spirit to teach, preach, exorcise spirits, and to heal illness. His prayers, words, or touch can reverse illness. In this case, with the leprous man, it is the touch of Jesus and his words that heal.

The author of Mark's gospel was not an eyewitness of the leper's healing, but an enthusiastic believer in Jesus. He believed that Jesus was the anointed one, who would bring in the coming dominion of God in which justice, equity, and the peace of God would prevail. Scholars are not certain who authored the Gospel of Mark. He may have been a follower of Peter's, or perhaps, a leader of an early house-church congregation of the mid-first to second century. The location of its writing is also uncertain, perhaps Syropalestine, or maybe somewhere near Rome.

The first receivers probably heard Mark's gospel rather than read it. It was written in simple *koine* Greek, a language that ordinary working class folks spoke... artisans, service people, military families, and the like, all knew *koine* Greek. Most of the hearers were probably Gentile followers of the Jesus movement. They lived in stressful, chaotic times with constant regime changes and lots of social changes accompanied by political activity centered on revolt against Roman rule. Violence was common. Cruelty was rampant. Life wasn't orderly and it wasn't easy, especially for Gentile Christians living in areas influenced by Roman rule and Roman culture.

He was alive, but unclean. The leper whose own ears had heard "unclean" called out so many times as he approached others, had also heard that a man named Jesus could heal and might heal him. Friends said this Jesus was unafraid of lepers and other rejected, isolated folks. Some friend said that Jesus was teaching and ministering in the area, so the leper sought him out. In verse 40, when he found Jesus, he fell to his knees and begged Jesus to make him clean. In v. 41, moved with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched him, and said "be made clean!", and the leper's skin was instantly, completely made smooth and clean.

He was alive, but walked alone and in exile. The leper was also told to show himself to the priest to offer what the ritual laws of Moses required to prove that he was clean and free of leprosy. (It involved a week-long regimen of sacrifices and prayers.) Jesus also sternly sent the

man away from him with a strict warning to tell no one what had happened or how he had been made clean.

But.....it didn't quite work out that way. The man took a detour before the priest's office, and spread the news of his healing everywhere. Praise be to God! **He was alive, but no longer alone.** The man's excited testimony gathered many people who listened to his story. As a result, those crowds of people grew so great around Jesus, that he could no longer minister within the towns and cities. Jesus was forced to preach, teach, and heal in the "lonely places" -- meaning remote and isolated locations.

Jesus and the leper, in a way, now have *reversed* roles. The man who was once isolated, *now* is included. Jesus who was once the focus of attention and *inclusion* in the cities, is *now isolated* and limited to rural areas.

Later, in Mark's healing stories, in chapter 5, another isolated man requires cleansing. He is said to be possessed by many unclean spirits. Some scholars suggest he was a victim of epilepsy, or mental illness: his affliction is unknown: but he is self-destructive, and chained, He cuts himself with stones, and beats himself with his own fists. He violently thrashes about and no one can control him. His name is Legion. Jesus has pity on him, and casts out the multitude (6,000) of spirits. When this man is healed, Jesus gives him a command that is different from that of the leper. He is told to "go to your own people, those who are friends of your family, and tell everyone how much Jesus has done for you." The man tells **so** many people that after that, Jesus is often "flashmobbed"-----swamped with people needing to be healed by his words and his touch.

Jesus healed the lepers, cured the paralyzed, helped those with chronic conditions, made those with withered limbs whole, healed the deaf, helped the blind to see, and the lame to walk. **They were all alive, but lived among the shadows and the margins.** Once excluded from the temple and community, alive, and whole, now they are accepted, welcomed, and affirmed into the temple and community. To borrow a phrase of Pastor Brad's, Jesus through his healing work, brought to them a ministry of "justice and joy" ...indeed, a ministry of inclusion.

In our contemporary life, you and I know individuals who, for some reason, due perhaps to some difference, some condition, some circumstance, are isolated and alone. They need a ministry of inclusion. They need acceptance and affirmation to flourish as who they are so they

may flourish. To illustrate what I mean, I'll share a short experience that Pat and I recall from several years ago that's still applicable to today.

I once served in a small Metropolitan Community Church in East Texas. A man, recently retired, came to us. John was a man bowed down by depression, guilt, anxiety, and isolation. **He was alive, but lived in the shadows and margins.** He owned a lake house at Caddo Lake, a beautiful lake on the edge of the Big Thicket, a wooded, swampy area. Heavy fog is common there, and one dark, foggy evening driving to his lake house for the weekend, he didn't see a young couple changing a tire on the shoulder of the narrow road. Sadly, his car struck the young woman and she died at the scene. Crushed by the trauma of the accident, and now shunned by the people of the town where he grew up and resided, he was living, and as he said, "a living death". John came to us at MCC, hoping to find some understanding. It took a while, but through the love and life of our small, simple church, through community potlucks, and small group Bible studies, through worship, and game nights, through our loving hands and our affirming words, his sorrow began to lift. He also found the courage to deal with his coming-out issues and feelings of unworthiness related to who is. He worked with us and became convinced that he **IS** worthy; a generous, kind, lovable person made in the image of God...now restored to happiness and wholeness by our simple ministry of justice and inclusion.

Christ healed him but used our hands and our hearts to do so. How many folks like John do we know who also need acceptance and affirmation? Who may be socially shunned--much like lepers among us? Who are those who may be different and live at the margins of our community? Who are the isolated? Who are those who differ in race, ethnicity, age, income, ability, orientation or gender identity who are left out? Who do we know who needs to hear words of inclusion? Who deserves our understanding and encouragement? Who needs our loving

attention? Just as John did, what groups or persons need the touch of our Christian hearts and hands?

(Shall we pray) We thank you, Jesus, that you came to heal. Use us, we pray. Use our voices, our music, our stories, our creativity and use our hearts and our hands, and to touch others.

Bless us as we do Your work of inclusion. In your healing Name we pray, Amen.