

“Following Jesus for All the Wrong Reasons”

Mark 1: 40-45

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A leper came to Jesus asking for cleansing—begging for cleansing. He wasn't just asking to be healed, but to be cleansed. HEALING was for the body—CLEANSING was for the soul. To be healed meant that he would no longer have sores on his body. To be cleansed meant that people would no longer treat him as a leper.

In that time and place, being a leper was about the worst thing that could happen to you. A leper was sick, but that was just the beginning. Lepers couldn't live with their families. They couldn't live in town. They were required to stay away from other people. They had to live out in the countryside—in a cave if they were lucky—on the bare ground if they weren't. If they saw someone coming their direction, they had to shout, "Unclean, unclean!" so the other person would not accidentally become infected. Lepers couldn't hold a job, so they were reduced to begging.

And lepers didn't get much sympathy. People thought that God was punishing lepers for something they had done. We get that same sort of attitude today with smoking and AIDS. If you are a smoker or have AIDS or addictions, people assume that you have brought your troubles on yourself. It's a terrible thing to be sick and not to get any sympathy! I will never forget when we were touring the hospital in Rubek, Sudan and I asked what was behind a wall. The woman answered, “The lepers. We don't allow anyone to see them.” Still today kept away from society and treated with little dignity.

But a quick reading of our Gospel lesson tells us that this leper got sympathy from Jesus. It says that Jesus was "moved with pity." At least that is what some translations say.

The New Testament was written originally in Greek. We have none of the original manuscripts, and the manuscripts that we do have don't always agree. In this case, some manuscripts don't say that Jesus was moved with pity, but that he was angry. We aren't sure which is the correct reading, but it is possible that Jesus was angry."

Why would Jesus be angry? In this early part of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus was going about teaching and healing, but he had a problem. The problem was that people tended to follow him for his miracles and to ignore his teaching. People wanted Jesus to heal them, but they didn't really want to become his disciples—to give him their hearts. As Meister Eckhart put it, some people love Christ "as they love their cow for the milk and cheese and profit it brings to them."

We have a phrase for it—"falling in love for all the wrong reasons." I thought there must be a country song by that name, but I couldn't find it. "Falling in love for all the wrong reasons." If there isn't a song by that name, there ought to be. It could be a big country music hit—"Falling in love for all the wrong reasons."

That phrase came to mind as I was writing this sermon. It speaks of being attracted to someone for superficial reasons—falling in love with someone's sporty car or the way they swing when they walk.

There isn't anything wrong with those things, but you need more than that to sustain a lifelong relationship.

Jesus was trying to avoid a problem like that—people who followed him for superficial reasons—people who wanted him to heal them but who did not want to give him their hearts. Jesus' ministry, in these early chapters of Mark, focused on two things—teaching and healing, and Jesus was concerned to keep the two in balance. He didn't mind people coming to him for healing, but he wanted them also to embrace his teaching. He was happy to heal their bodies, but he wanted also to transform their souls. To do anything less would be like slapping a new coat of paint on an old rusty car.

Now this leper was asking Jesus to cleanse him, and Jesus was concerned. It was one thing to heal Peter's mother-in-law of fever, as he had just done, but to cleanse a leper would be so dramatic that it might, indeed, attract people for all the wrong reasons—people who wanted help only with their sick bodies—people who cared nothing about their sick souls.

But a man on his knees is a pitiful thing! It's hard to ignore a man who is begging for something that only you can give!

So Jesus surely felt compassion for this poor leper. But he must also have felt torn—perhaps even angry. If he healed this man and the word got around, Jesus was likely to be swamped by people coming to him for all the wrong reasons.

Perhaps that's too harsh. There's nothing wrong with coming to Jesus for healing of the body. The problem is people who care **ONLY** for the healing of the body. Jesus has a deeper concern—the healing of our souls. He didn't want people to forget that. He didn't want people to come **ONLY** for the healing of their bodies.

That, in fact, is what happens at the end of the story. It says that Jesus sternly warned the man not to tell anyone but the priest, but the man told people anyway. He turned out to be quite an evangelist. As a result, people came from everywhere to see Jesus. He could no longer go into towns, but had to stay out in the countryside. Even there, people came to him from everywhere. It was like being a rock star. Not only could Jesus find no peace, but also his ministry was diminished.

So what does that have to do with us? We, too, are tempted to follow Jesus **ONLY** for what he can do for us—and ignore his call to true discipleship.

I am reminded of television evangelists who invite people to believe and grow rich. Those evangelists often become rich themselves—because we like to believe people who tell us that God wants us have a Mercedes and a Rolex.

I'm reminded of the man who shook my hand at the door of the church one Sunday. My sermon had been about costly discipleship. The New Testament has quite a lot to say about costly discipleship. As this man shook my hand that morning, he said: "Preacher, I can tell you why people come to church. They come to church so they can go away feeling good."

I took that as a gentle rebuke. I think the man was telling me that sermons about costly discipleship weren't going to fill the pews. "Tell the people that they're wonderful! Tell them what they want to hear! Toss in a funny story! That's what sells, preacher!"

But that's empty discipleship! Hollow Christianity! When the leper came to Jesus for healing, Jesus was concerned about empty discipleship—people who would come to him for what they could get—but who would deny him their hearts.

That's what Jesus wants—our hearts! Jesus can do a lot with people who gives him their hearts, but he can't do much with people who come to him only for—in Meister Eckhart's words—milk and cheese and profits.

But it is certainly possible for people to be drawn to Jesus by needs for healing, and then to find in Jesus much more. It happens all the time. Very often, people who are drawn to Jesus by illness or danger or fear find in Jesus something far greater than the immediate answer to the problem.

Bill McAllister is a Methodist pastor who served as a chaplain in Vietnam. He tells of flying to a firebase one day, and having two soldiers greet him as he got off the helicopter. They were excited to see him, and eager to talk. One of them said that he had come to know Jesus just before departing for Vietnam. At the firebase, he had been paired up with the other soldier, who was not a believer. The two of them became buddies. Together they built a deep bunker, and that was their home away from home.

Then, a few nights before Bill's visit, the firebase had come under mortar attack. In their bunker, the two men were about as safe as they could be, but the Christian soldier felt a sudden urge to run through the barrage to another bunker—he thought it was a message from God. His buddy thought that he was crazy, but when the Christian started running, his buddy followed. Just as they got to the other bunker, a mortar shell dropped exactly on top of their now-empty bunker. All that was left was a smoking hole. Needless to say, that made quite an impression on both of them.

When Bill flew into the firebase that day, the two men met him with a serious purpose—they wanted to be baptized. They took Bill to their old foxhole, which was three feet deep in muddy water. That was where they wanted to be baptized. Bill's helicopter was about ready to take off, so he didn't have time to ask many questions. He decided to take on faith that they were honest believers—so boots and all, he slid down the brown muddy water. One by one, he baptized both men there. Bill says, "They came up covered with mud and big grins from ear to ear."

As it turned out, that was Bill's last visit to that firebase, and he never saw those soldiers again. But one thing is for sure. They felt that God had saved their lives during that mortar attack, and they wanted to respond by giving Christ their lives in that muddy foxhole.

That's what Christ wants from us —our lives. He can help us in many ways, but he will not be satisfied with anything less than transforming our lives at the core—who we are—and where we put our trust.

Christ wants to help you in a thousand ways today, but mostly he wants to remake you at the core—to remake your life—to turn you in a new direction—to give you a new heart—to make you a new person. Give him all that you are, and let him make you into all that you can be.