

14 February 2021
2 Kings 5:1-14
1 Corinthians 9:24-27
Mark 1:40-45

I read the other day of how, in some parts of the world, theologians and church leaders have felt the need to issue guidelines as to how Ash Wednesday might be observed without the human contact that is entailed in the action of imposing ashes on the foreheads of the faithful.¹ While in New Zealand we are currently without such restrictions, we can no doubt remember how odd it felt last year to adjust our normal behaviour so as to avoid touching others. Covid19 also required that we all spent some time last year in at least some degree of social isolation during lockdown; and now requires that some people spend weeks in quarantine or isolation. These strange experiences test us at a most profound level. Most of us have an innate need for human contact, including touch; we have a deep need of human connection.

Our Old Testament and Gospel readings today touch on (if you'll excuse the pun) some deep human needs.

In Mark 1 Jesus is approached by a man who has, most translations say, leprosy. His condition means that he is separated from the community, and the touch of another human being is likely a rare thing. Jesus reaches out and touches him. Much has been made of this, and parallels drawn with people who have willingly entered into situations where touch has entailed grave risk: most notably Mother Theresa and Princess Diana. This man's deep need for human contact, for connection, for community, is met in Jesus who touches him, heals him of the condition, and instructs him to do what is necessary for him to re-enter full community. Jesus provides this man with the ability to once again enjoy the warm embrace of full human relating.

Despite Jesus' strong instructions, the man in this story doesn't seem to go off to see the priest as the law in Leviticus required. We get the impression that he was just

¹ See, for example, <https://religionnews.com/2021/02/09/no-touching-consortium-churches-share-ideas-for-celebrating-ash-wednesday-in-a-pandemic/>

rather too elated at his release from his suffering to be bothered with the technicalities.

In the case of Naaman in 2nd Kings we have someone else who, at first, can't be bothered with the technicalities either. However, in Naaman's case the issue is pride. The Jordan is not an impressive river by any stretch of the imagination. Naaman feels that Elisha's simple recommendation of washing in the Jordan is beneath his dignity as the commander of the army of the king of the impressive nation of Aram (modern day Syria) with its own impressive rivers. How humiliating! And here we touch on another deep human need: our need to feel valued.

The problem with our need to feel valued is that it can lead us in deeply unhelpful directions. The challenge to Naaman – and to us – is “Can the humiliation that leads to health be better than the pride that leaves you a leper?”² Naaman's servants are quite clever. They implicitly affirm his greatness when they say to him, “Surely if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, wouldn't you have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you to do this simple thing, ‘Wash and be cleansed!’”

“Can the humiliation that leads to health be better than the pride that leaves you a leper?” I have been reading lately about vulnerability in *Daring Greatly*, by Brené Brown. Brown defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure”³, and, she asserts, being vulnerable – not shielding ourselves from and not avoiding uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure – is the key to developing courage, compassion and connection.⁴ Naaman had to be vulnerable – he had to face the uncertainty of not knowing whether Elisha's treatment would work; he had to expose himself to the humiliation of being thought less of by his servants. But if he had not been vulnerable, then change for the better – healing – would not have been possible.

² This phrase is from Wright, *Twelve*, p.30.

³ Brown, p. 34

⁴ Brown p.10.

Back to Mark's Gospel again:

Depending on our translation, we may read that Jesus was "moved with compassion" when the man came to him with his request, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Compassion is certainly what we've learned to expect of Jesus. There is however a reasonable case to be made that the original text reads that Jesus was "indignant", and indeed some translations offer that rendering.⁵

But why would Jesus be indignant?

One answer is that Jesus is angered that anyone could feel that they were beneath his will to make them clean. The man's "If you are willing" qualifier to his request carries with it an implied, "If you can be bothered with me."⁶

Many people – perhaps some of you here today – struggle with self-worth. Indeed, the issue is a significant part of Brené Brown's work on vulnerability. She writes,

If you roughly divide the men and women I've interviewed into two groups – those who feel a deep sense of love and belonging, and those who struggle for it – there's only one variable that separates the groups: Those who feel lovable, who love, and who experience belonging simply believe they are *worthy* of love and belonging. They don't have better or easier lives, they don't have fewer struggles with addiction or depression, and they haven't suffered fewer traumas or bankruptcies or divorces, but in the midst of all these struggles, they have developed practices that enable them to hold onto the belief that they are worthy of love, belonging, and even joy.⁷

"If you are willing; if you can be bothered with me; if I am worthy of your regard and time ... then you can make me clean."

And Jesus says, "I am willing, I can be bothered with you, you are worthy: Be clean!"

Jesus says "You are worthy" to each one of us. We are worthy because in Christ God has chosen to adopt us as his children. Each one of us is a beloved child of God.

⁵ See the discussion in Thiessen, pp. 55-57.

⁶ Williams, p.33.

⁷ Brown, p.11.

And so we can practise being vulnerable; we can face uncertainty; we can risk failure and disappointment; we can open ourselves to potential hurt; ... because underneath it all and above all, God has chosen us, loves us, and counts us worthy.

We face a difficulty with readings like 2nd Kings 5 and Mark 1 around the word “leprosy”. Most modern Bibles still use the word but will include a footnote along the lines of “The word traditionally translated *leprosy* was used for various diseases affecting the skin.” In all likelihood the disease in question was not leprosy (Hansen’s disease) at all. It appears almost certain that leprosy was not known in the biblical lands until just around or a century or two after the time of Jesus.⁸ It is unfortunate that the Greek word *lepra*, the word used in the Bible for some unknown skin disease came to be applied to the dreadful and disfiguring disease that we associate with the term, with the characteristic symptoms of skin lesions, reddish skin, muscle weakness, thickening of facial skin, ears, and hands, loss of sensation in fingers and toes, and the damage that can occur as a result of numbness; together with secondary infections that can result in tissue loss, causing fingers and toes to become shortened and deformed.

But if it’s not this horrible leprosy then why the big deal about *lepra*, and what was going on between Jesus and the man who came to him? One plausible possibility was that this all revolved around ritual impurity.

It appears that *lepra* was some form of minor, but nevertheless persistent and untreatable skin condition. It could however correct itself sometimes, which would lead to the possibility that someone would need to be examined to be certified as free from the disease.

The kind of social exclusion that we associate with historical depictions of leprosy was practiced in relation to *lepra*, but this was not because it was regarded as contagious (and we might note that social exclusion does not seem to have been practiced in relation to other infectious diseases). Social exclusion was practiced because the disease rendered one ritually impure.

⁸ Thiessen, p. 48; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leprosy#History>

Ritual impurities required that one keep away from holy things and holy places.⁹ To come before God, or in contact with the things of God, while in a state of ritual impurity displayed deep irreverence to a holy God. It is difficult to fully rationalise the conditions that led to ritual impurity: one suggestion is that they are all linked to things that represent or are associated with the forces of death – in the case of *lepra*, its characteristic whiteness and flaking of skin was reminiscent of the deterioration of corpses. Whatever the case, the point is that the holy and almighty God has determined that there are some conditions in which one is unfit to come before God. Perhaps these may be regarded as arbitrary as rules around appropriate attire in Parliament: but here I won't quibble, because in the end it is *God* alone who fit to determine what is appropriate in God's presence.

The condition of ritual impurity could in some circumstances be passed from one person to the next, so social exclusion was practiced.

Now it is often thought that Jesus did away with all the rules around ritual impurity. This is highly arguable. In this passage, in fact, Jesus seems to affirm the rules – “Go to the priest” he tells the man, because it is the priest alone who has the authority to certify that the man is ritually clean even though he is already healed of the disease. It is only when the man is *ritually clean* that he will be able to re-enter society.

Jesus doesn't do away with the ritual purity rules. Jesus does something much more profound: he removes the *lepra*, the reason why the man is ritually impure in the first place. Jesus doesn't dismantle the system of ritual impurity; he removes the impurity. An analogy can be found in our current Covid19 system of managed isolation and quarantine. It is one thing for someone to be tested free of disease and to pass through the requirements of the system and to be free to leave isolation; it would be another thing entirely to dismantle the MIQ system so that people could be free.

Jesus doesn't dismantle the system of ritual impurity; he removes the impurity.

⁹ The following attempts to summarise the detailed discussion in Thiessen, pp. 9-20, 43-68.

You may wonder if the distinction matters much. I think it does.

I think it does because to do away with the rules around ritual purity would be tantamount to Jesus saying God's holiness doesn't matter. Instead, in ridding the man of the source of the impurity, Jesus affirms God's holiness while moving the man into a state by which he is once again able to approach the holy God.

This is a caution for us: It can be easy for us to regard God's grace in such a way that it diminishes God. As we come into Lent this week, let us remind ourselves that God is holy, almighty, creator and judge of all; and that it is *only* through his wondrous grace that we are brought into relationship with him and adopted as his beloved children. It is through Jesus's work on the cross that we are made clean. Our worthiness does not depend on anything we have done: it depends only on his grace in choosing us. And actually, that is wondrously freeing, because if I am honest I know that my self-worth is really too fragile if it depends on my ability, my character, my achievements.

As we come into Lent, let us remind ourselves that the God who adopts us is gracious *and holy*, and let us then approach him, worship him, and serve him, in gratitude and awe.

Sources:

- Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020.
- Tom Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays: Year B*, London: SPCK 2002
- Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections: Year B*, London: SPCK 2005
- Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, London: Penguin, 2013