

“Heal and Tell”
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Psalm 30, Mark 1:40-45 Sermon
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For Private Distribution Only

As little information as we have to go on, it's hard not to admire the leper in today's scripture lesson. He was at once conciliatory and direct in his request to Jesus, *kneeling humbly* yet naming his desire *precisely*: “Make me clean.” Spurned and ostracized as he was for his malady, he had to have had *chutzpah* to approach Jesus at all. And it paid off, for we are told that Jesus was moved with pity and immediately granted the man's wish. Ask and ye shall receive...

But there was one condition, and Jesus didn't name it until after the fact: Don't tell anyone! ... We're not told whether or not the man assented to Jesus' request. He'd already been healed after all. If he did agree, perhaps he had his fingers crossed behind his back. But, either way, what was he *supposed to do* when people saw how miraculously and instantaneously his condition had changed? In particular, what was he going to say when, as per Jesus' instructions, he presented himself to the priests for ritual purification in his newly healthy state? ...It seems to me that there was an inherent contradiction or two in Jesus' instructions. Tell no one, yet notify the priests? Graciously accept the healing, yet go about your business, keeping your wholly natural and appropriate responses of overwhelming joy and gratitude to yourself? ...Maybe Jesus was counting on this guy being one of those other ungrateful lepers.

But, alas, like today's psalmist, the man must have boldly proclaimed something along the lines of, “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.” (Psalm 30:11-12, NRSV) ...And, frankly, who could blame him? But the result of this transaction —Jesus' healing touch and the man's subsequent proclamation—was that now

the leper could go wherever he pleased as any “normal” person of his day could, while Jesus was suddenly forced to stay outside the city’s limits in order to escape notice, and that, even there, he was followed by people from all over.

Some would say that this shift was *all* that had occurred that day. As John Dominic Crossan and John Shelby Spong tell it in their book *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, “...assume that Jesus, who did not and could not cure that disease or any other one, healed the poor man’s illness by refusing to accept the disease’s ritual uncleanness and social ostracization.”¹ Informed by science like so many modern Christians, Crossan and Spong seek to distinguish first between curing and healing, as well as between supernatural and political-sociological phenomena. For them, when Jesus dared to touch the quarantined leper, the social wall that had been built between that man and his family and community crumbled, readmitting him to society, relationship, and physical touch. This perspective may in some ways be reinforced by the fact that the leprosy--or *lepra*--of Jesus’ day was actually something akin to eczema or psoriasis— a fungal infection that caused scaly, flaky skin, but was neither contagious nor truly an illness. Just a relatively minor condition labeled impure by the Old Testament’s Holiness Code, which happened to morph into a source of extreme social stigma. ...Surely Jesus’ willingness to touch the man and all that that opened up were a big piece of the man’s healing, but was it truly the *only one*? Could there have been a physical component? Do we have to totally suspend our disbelief to even go *near* there?

...As theologians, Crossan, Spong, and even Marcus Borg are true products of the Enlightenment and tend to approach the New Testament in strictly historical, measurable, factual terms. This is

¹ Crossan, John Dominic and John Shelby Spong: *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. p82.

certainly a refreshing change from the deceptive faith theater we have witnessed in too many snake oil sellers—from QVC personalities to far too wealthy televangelists. This lens of literalness is rational and straightforward. It doesn't require us to stretch or suspend anything. We can tie a neat little bow around it and be on our ways. ...And for some of us, that is enough. Indeed, this perspective does have a place on the spectrum of belief represented by both the United Church of Christ and the Center for Progressive Christianity. It's why the Center's Point 1 is worded so openly as, "By calling ourselves progressive, we mean we are Christians who believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life."²

I personally lived there for awhile on my faith journey's circuitous path from Evangelical Christianity to Unitarian Universalism to Progressive Christianity. But for me the implications of that stance eventually became too great. For one thing, it felt confining to me, in some ways as limiting as the Fundamentalist interpretations of scripture with which I had been raised. It seemed there was very little wiggle room left for faith or the movement of the Holy Spirit. For a second thing, I had not a clue where prayer, or at least healing, intercessory prayer fit into the equation. And, finally, I knew and know without a doubt that I have had irrational, unexplainable experiences in my life, most recently the way just the right people and resources materialized at just the right moments for my family during and after my father's illness and death. "God things" I like to call them, so perfect in that particular moment that they are way out of synchronicity's league.

The truth is, today we live not in a black and white Modernist reality, but in a Postmodern world, which fully acknowledges the range of philosophical and religious options available to us. As

² <http://www.progressivechristianity.org/about/8points.cfm>

such, nothing is really an either/or proposition. We see statistics and anecdotes about the power of intercessory prayer or Reiki and realize that science and religion or spirituality are not mutually exclusive. Just as history and religion are not incompatible, and facts don't necessarily cancel out faith or higher truth. We realize that there is often a contradictory both/and quality at the intersection of our physical and our spiritual lives. We realize this, and yet we are still feeling our ways, and, quite honestly, there may be no easy or comfortable way to live alongside ambiguity. Perhaps that is in part why our liberal-minded denomination and congregation are no larger than they are: We'll likely always have more questions than answers, and that's way more shades of gray than many people can tolerate.

And, just maybe, that's part of the reason Jesus asked the former leper to keep his healing encounter to himself. You see, there were a number of magicians and wonder workers in Jesus' day, healing people for the spectacle and the notoriety of it all. Jesus did not want to be confused with these people, who were often referred to as "imposters." Nor did he want the scope of his ministry to be so severely limited. For he had come not just to heal individual bodies and lives, but to break down and turn the mean-spiritedness, corruption, and injustice of human systems upside down. As such, Jesus was called not to fame and fortune, but to humility and poverty. He was a *modest* mover and shaker, whose job it was not to promote himself, but to point away from himself toward God and the ways of God. A *tender, compassionate* yet powerful agent of healing and change.

Nevertheless, I have to admit there's still a part of me that wonders whether Jesus was playing a little game of reverse psychology with the man when he asked him not to tell anyone. Maybe just maybe, he would have been *less* likely to tell the world if Jesus had said nothing. Surely Jesus

must have known that he was taking a risk and that, sooner or later, the cat would be out of the bag. We don't hear that Jesus summoned the man back and chided him for disobedience.

Jesus just dealt gracefully with the consequences of his rising notoriety and gave God the glory.

As we move toward that contemplative season of Lent when we look at the broken places in our lives and our selves, I would encourage us to ponder the sort of healing we might request, or at least discuss, were we to encounter Jesus along Mitchell Street. And then I would invite us to go deeper to discover just what that particular healing represents more broadly in our lives and in the world. What are we really asking or longing for? A cure for leprosy or a loving community? Smooth skin or the love and affection of a close relationship?

We may be inclined to keep our discoveries and whatever healing comes of them to ourselves.

Or we might just find ourselves overflowing with gratitude and a grasp on the idea that our healing is intricately connected with one another's and the world's healing. We might just decide to heal and tell with boldness...and for all the right reasons.

Amen.