

Jesus the Healer?

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Mark 1:40-45

Preached by Rev. Dr. Jacque Franklin

Ben and Jeff are at John Wesley Ranch with 22 teens for a confirmation retreat. I got back yesterday. We have been teaching confirmation classes together. Right now we are studying World religions. We discussed the history and basics of Buddhism in our last class and at the retreat we reviewed the basics of Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Through all of the topics I am reminded again how odd practices of religion look to those who have fresh eyes.

In their eyes I see the question, “Why should any of this matter to me and my life. My parents are losing their job, my sibling left home, I’m having trouble in school, and someone close to me has died. How does any of this relate to my life?”

We talked about how humans yearn to make meaning out of the problems in their life. A worldview develops a set of beliefs, a culture of practices, to help one cope with the inevitability of life.

In Jesus day it was no different. The prevailing belief about death and suffering, disease and disability was that you must have done something to deserve it. God punished people for sins they or their family committed.

So, as Jesus was traveling and preaching throughout Galilee....after one of his messages... As he greeted people and answered questions...

a man falls at his feet, kneeling. He is wearing the torn recognizable clothes of a leper.

People with leprosy lived isolated, with this contagious skin disease, from the rest of the society. He was required to shout out his infirmity so that others could avoid him.

I didn’t notice it before, but the commentary points out how Mark’s Gospel account includes hints of Jesus’ emotions. Jesus took pity on the man with leprosy. In Greek the word used for pity has more sting, more irritation to it. After Jesus heals him there is a kind agitation in his reaction to the leper. The agitation is similar to the response Jesus had to his mother when she asked him to turn water into wine at a wedding banquet. “Woman, it is not yet my time”.

Then I started noticing other times of agitation for Jesus.... usually around changing his plans to accommodate someone else.

Another instance is when a woman touches his hem in a crowd while he was on his way to another location to heal Jairus’ daughter. I imagine when he turned to look his eyes were glinting with agitation.

I know that feeling that arises when interrupted while focused on something else.

The crowds followed him and found him in his deserted places of prayer. It was hard to find that sacred place of solace.

The Leper says to Jesus, "If you choose...you can make me clean."

Jesus chose to heal him.

Whenever requested Jesus healed.

Each time he healed, every miracle of healing undercut the mindset of the day that said, "you deserved it."

Leprosy is highly contagious and in that day not easily treatable. The most pain comes in the early stages until the disease kills off the nerve endings. The affected areas become numb and the possibility of injury is high. The injury can become infected resulting in appendages lost to gangrene. It is a hideous disease causing deformity and unsightly blemishes. The most damaging aspect of the disease, however, is the imposed isolation. They no longer are able to relate to people they know and love the same way. They are not touched for fear of spreading the disease.

Jesus broke the rules and touched him.

Jesus chose to heal him.

I imagine it was tempting to relieve the pain and suffering of everyone who came his way. It helps me see Jesus' human side...he couldn't turn down someone who needed him. He had too much compassion for that. He had a more focused purpose, though. And each time he succumbed to another miracle the crowds grew larger and larger. As the tension rose, his time grew shorter and shorter.

He needed to get his message out there in the most efficient way he could. He selected disciples, built trusting relationships with them, taught them and left them with an important message.

Was it getting to him? All the traveling he did where he saw and heard about the injustice of people turned away from their very families, away from their faith communities to fend for themselves. People shunned because of their condition attributed to sin, thought to be a punishment for something they had done or maybe it was something their family did.

Jesus came to bring a message.... not just to heal. His mission wasn't to settle down and become a town healer. He was a preacher bearing the good news of God. And for the most part it was a difficult message for people to get. He wasn't there to become popular, overthrow a government, and wage a war

Jesus came to bring a message.

He was there to live a message.

A counter-culture message.

"No, God is not an angry God looking for restitution. Look at the miracles, I am here to show you the way of God." Jesus says in so many ways.

The way of relationship, community, and healing goes deeper than a skin disease. Jesus left a message of a healing that lasts generations instead of days.

Listen to the parables, listen to the stories.

God is a God of creation.
God is a God of restoration.
God is a God of new possibilities.
God wants to set the divine human relationship right.

I think I get this part.

I went to Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, now known as Palmer Seminary. Their message is a social evangelical message...the whole gospel for the whole world. Theology there was more on the middle to liberal end of the continuum. As I faced ordination in an American Baptist Church I realized that I wasn't satisfied with the sin and salvation part of my theology. In fact at my ordination counsel there was a pastor who wanted to vote against me since I didn't have the theology of atonement worked out. One person asked me about the cross. I know how to articulate the theology... but I didn't believe it.

I'll give you an example...

God created us in God's image. God created us and loves us so that we may live in harmony and fellowship with God.

(Here is the sin and salvation part)

The Bible says that we have been separated and alienated from God because we have willfully turned our backs on God. This is what the Bible means by sin—choosing our way instead of God's way. The evidence of this is all around us, in the moral chaos and heartache

of our world. The headlines scream every day that we live in a broken, sin-ravaged world. God yearns to forgive us and bring us back in relationship. God has done everything possible to reconcile us to God self. In God's plan, by death on the Cross, Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sins, taking the judgment of God that we deserve upon Himself when He died on the Cross. Now, by His resurrection from the dead, Christ has broken the bonds of death and opened the way to eternal life for us.

This is called the substitutionary theory of atonement. Since humanity cannot fulfill its debt Christ steps forward and fulfills justice through his substitution... death on the cross. Redemption is a result of the payment of a debt incurred through sin by means of a death that satisfies divine justice. Or, Christ suffers the violence of the cross and dies in order to uphold the integrity of moral order in the universe. These theories tell us that only blood can set things right.

The ordination counsel made up of pastors and lay people of the local American Baptist Churches packed into the beautiful little chapel of First Baptist Church of Dayton. I told them that the God I have come to know doesn't fit this theology and that I haven't got an alternative worked out yet.

Then I challenged them. Do you have your theology worked out completely? There wasn't a dissenting vote in the end. I passed the scrutiny.

It wasn't until I joined this church in 2000 that I heard a theology of the cross I could stomach. Jim White preached the sermon. And it was one of those moments when the light just goes on! I had finally found it.

Listening to our youth I hear, "How can I believe in religion when it is the source of violence all over the world." Then I received this week's Christian Century where I read an article by Daniel M. Bell Jr. about how the logic of blood sacrifice shapes the way Christians think about God and how we act in the world. We don't sacrifice animals to God because Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice. This sets the precedence for redemptive blood or sacrifice to set things right. It is the thought behind capital punishment, war, lifting God up as the ultimate sanction and source of redemptive violence.

I agree with Daniel Bell when he writes this is wrong. God does not demand or require blood to redeem us. God neither inflicts violence nor desires suffering in order to set the divine-human relation right. "In spite of its pervasiveness in Christian imagery, the cost of communion of reconciliation and redemption is not blood and suffering." Bell writes.

The prevailing mindset of ancient Israel is alive and well in our country. Violence saves. The theme of most movie plots and TV series can be summed up as "people who use bad violence are pursued by people who use good violence and in the end good violence saves the day."

We talk about culture wars,
war on drugs,
war on poverty.
Someone loses the battle with cancer.

What caught my attention is the belief that sometimes it is redemptive to suffer violence. I may need to suffer or even die to save myself or others? Suffering violence as a way to make things right? Suffering violence can be cleansing purgative purifying?
Or more bluntly...some say that suffering is a means of paying for or being purged of one's sin. One suffers because one has sinned; one pays the price and thereby restores the moral order and ensures one's own redemption.

With that reasoning, the Leper suffers with his disease because it will redeem him. It is a matter of inflicting violence on others to restore balance or encouraging others to others to suffer violence to restore balance.

I suppose we could skip over the story of the cross.

But Bell suggests rather than skip the cross...pass through it. Recalling the temptation story of Jesus in the Wilderness, the temptations were good things, like feeding the world! You'd think that Satan would want Jesus to be tortured after all he is the anthropomorphic symbol of evil.

Our temptation is to skip the cross to avoid the violence. Bell's theology of the cross suggests that by Jesus enduring the scandal of the Cross He shows us that God does NOT demand blood. Instead of appeasing the wrath of a bloodthirsty angry god the story shows us the depths and lengths to which God will go so that we might share life with God. Christ's work on the cross displays the fullness of divine charity, the lengths to which God will go to renew and restore communion with us even in the face of our bloody rebellion. Christ takes our place not to suffer our punishment for us but to offer God devotion and obedience!

I can just see the confirmands eyes glaze over about now. "So that is all there is to Jesus' life? That's his message?" they mutter under their breath, "Devotion and obedience?"

That is not enough for me either. Devotion and obedience only goes so far. Where is the beauty, the excitement of life in the spirit! What does the Jesus experience reveal about life, about God, about purpose?!

In the Jesus story a leper comes to Jesus and falls to his knees, begging for mercy.
"If you choose, you can heal me," he says.

In Jesus for the Non-Religious Bishop John Shelby Spong states, "What does it say about our definition of human life when the perennial pleas of Christian worship are

for mercy? Can anger that has turned inward ever be a source of life? Are we human beings ever helped by being told how hopeless, wretched and evil we are? Does that ever make us whole? Does it ever make us more loving?"

Spong accuses the Christian church throughout history of making its people constantly aware of their failures, their inadequacies and weaknesses, thereby, defining Christian people as chronically dependent, ever-rebellious children who deserve the wrath of the judgmental God. The message or gospel of Jesus is regularly proclaimed as the story of God's divine and ever-gracious rescue of a hopelessly sinful people from the fate that they have truly earned. The traditional way we tell the Christ story makes an ogre out of God, a victim out of Jesus and angry people who must be eternally grateful and thus helplessly dependent. ..

That's not good news ...

Who needs a God who would require the death of the divine son before being willing to forgive a fallen humanity? That is a portrait of God as a divine child abuser. (Where were you Spong when I was defending my ordination?)

So what is this good news?

What is this message and purpose of Jesus if it is not about rescuing us from God's punishment? All through Jesus life his actions, his words, burned into the

memories of the disciples minds...once they got it....they had to tell itthen they had to write it down so that it would be preserved. The words scream the message of, “oneness with God and others is possible!”

Jesus is willing to die for it.....

it is so important for us to get it...

“I came to give you life and give it abundantly!” John remembers in his gospel. The message to be passed on is how to live a fuller humanity.

Jesus is irritated at what religion has done to humanity. Religion has reduced her to begging for mercy. The ruptured relationship needs to be restored.

Jesus knows this is his purpose, his call in life.

He can't escape it. Everywhere he goes there are hurting people. People cut off from relationship due to prejudice, fear, and hate. This is not what God intended.

And so he chooses to heal and breaks the conventional social boundary to show the man that leprosy does not define him. That God is about more than physical healing but about wholeness of mind and soul. Over and Over again Jesus gives the example of what it means to be truly human. Jesus shows us how to live a life in communion with God. We no longer need to speculate about who or what God is, but to act out what God means. It is to look at the fullness of Jesus' humanity and to see in that, the presence of the divine.

“God is in Christ” is not a doctrine that leads to theologies of incarnation and trinity. It is an acclamation of a presence that leads to wholeness, a new creation, a new humanity and a new manner of living.

That's a theology I can live with.

But this is not about me.

It is about the responsibility each of us to interpret that most important message and to flesh it out in this day for our children, for the confirmands, & for the next generation. That is our job. To spread the word, don't keep it a secret. Amen