

SLD02.15.09 6th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Mark 1:40-45
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“What Do We Do Without the ‘Wow Factor’?”

Before we tackle this story of the leper’s healing, I want to ask this question: what was the point of Jesus’ ministry on earth? What was his message? Why was he sent in the first place?

One answer can be found earlier in this same first chapter of the gospel of Mark. When Jesus emerges from his wilderness experience to begin his three-year ministry in Galilee, here’s what he says: “The good news of God is this: The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe.”

That, first and foremost, is Jesus’ message. That’s what he goes through Galilee proclaiming and embodying and arguing and enacting for the three years of his ministry: the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe.

‘Course he conveys that message in a variety of ways – through his behavior, his teaching, his preaching, his choices regarding the people he hangs out with, the arguments he gets into. And, once in a while, he’ll perform a miracle.

Miracles are by no means the only manner of conveying the truth Jesus is trying to get across. Mostly he just prays, and teaches his disciples to pray, and preaches the Word to the people, and goes toe-to-toe with religious authorities. But every once in a while he’d do something out of this world, something nobody believed he *could* or *should* do – like touch the gross or welcome the weird or heal the gimpy or raise the dead.

It wasn’t the main thing he was sent to do, which was to tell people about the realness, the nearness, the power of God’s Kingdom, near, in fact, as his lips; close, in

reality, as his touch; powerful, in the experience of some, as his presence. And once in a while the power of that Kingdom sort of leaked through and rearranged reality as everyone knew it. And boy, when it did, it never failed to wow the crowd, and draw the curious, never mind pique the interest, and the demand, of the desperate. Anybody who witnessed Jesus' miracles for themselves invariably wanted a piece of *that* action for themselves.

Certainly the leper in today's story does. Regardless of what Jesus mainly came to do or most wanted people to understand, the leper had heard from reliable sources that the man could heal the sick. And he was sick and wanted healing. So he kneels before Jesus and declares his faith: "If you choose, Jesus, you can make me clean."

And sure enough, pitying him, Jesus stretches out his hand (crossing over some major Levitical boundaries there) and touches the leper, and says, "I *do* choose. Be made clean!" And the leper *is* made clean, healed and soothed and restored to an acceptable place in the community that had reviled him.

And they all lived happily ever after.

Only they don't, of course, all live happily ever after. That just isn't the way with Jesus' disciples, not then and not now. 'Course it wasn't the way with Jesus, either.

First thing the leper does is disobey Jesus' command not to tell anybody about what happened. (Though who could help but share such a miracle!) First thing Jesus has to do is withdraw from all the people who keep crowding around wanting healing. Maybe that's why Jesus told the leper not to go blethering about his healing: such things are simply not going to happen all that often and Jesus doesn't want to raise everybody's expectations. For, as I said, miracles are not what Jesus is primarily about. What he's primarily about is getting people to witness and believe and invest in the

power and the glory of the Kingdom of God, to recognize the nearness of the Kingdom in him, and to repent and turn around from our off-target, off-color, off-purpose lives so we can get on with the business of living whole and sharing lives of holy trust and abundant love. Only what that generally requires is not so much a miraculous healing, as he kept telling his disciples, as following him to the cross.

Though admittedly there's not much "Wow" factor in that.

Still, there aren't just a whole lot of people Jesus chooses to heal, even in the gospels. Can you imagine his followers limited only to those who'd received or even witnessed a miraculous healing? Be a pretty small band, then and now, huh? Still, we can't help but hope, can we, that Jesus will come through with a miracle for us. For some of us, our faith may even depend on it.

Suppose, for example, that Jesus had chosen *not* to heal the leper. What would the leper's story be like then?

Why, then it would be closer to most of *our* stories, wouldn't it?

In fact, the healing of the leper, and the bent-over woman, and Jairus' daughter and all the other miraculous healings that Jesus did can feel rather like a set-up, can't they. All these witnesses to the power of Jesus to heal when and if he chooses, while we note in our lives and all around us the places he either can't or chooses *not* to heal? What's up with that? Makes a body wonder what the purpose of prayer really is, doesn't it? Whether it's even worth the trouble.

Ever want a thing so deeply, or need a thing so desperately, for yourself or someone you love, and pray and pray and pray, and *not* get it? How many times do we have to be disappointed by prayer to give it up altogether? At what point does one

cease bothering with prayer at all? Or, just go through the motions without really expecting much from it?

Even renowned theologian Frederick Buechner notes that much of the time he prayed in the early years of his faith journey, he never really expected much back by way of an answer, never believed very strongly that anyone was actually listening, or even at times, that there really was anyone to listen at all. Which causes one to wonder, in this (failing) consumer economy in which time is money and there's not much of either going around these days, if prayer is not "efficacious," if it does not deliver, does not give us what we want when we want it, why bother with it at all?

A man known as the "Walt Whitman of advice columnists," named Cary Tennis, advises that the thing we really ought to be doing when we're "standing in the need of prayer," is to let go of hope and toughen up. Quit playing patty-cake, patty-cake, and give up our illusions of a soft, loving god who hears our prayers and answers them. Prepare for the battle ahead, says Tennis, and quit believing in fairy tales.¹

And I believe he has a point. To whatever extent we imagine God as a heavenly vending machine dropping divine benefits onto our laps according to our insertion of the right combination or quantity of prayer, we need to let that fairy tale go. We have only to a look around our lives or the life of the world to see for ourselves clearly that that ain't the way it works.

One commentator puts it this way: he says Jesus is trying to get those of us who think that "where the messiah is, there is no misery," to accept a new perspective: that "where there is misery, there is the messiah."

¹ Cary Tennis, The Sun, Jan. 2009, Issue 397, p. 14.

Okay, say we do. Say we accept this new perspective - when we're miserable, the messiah is with us. Great. Misery does love company. But is that as good as it gets? Should we faithful release all higher expectations and let go of any "wow factor" altogether? Suppose we manage to approach prayer less as demand than as surrender, is the most we can expect of prayer passive and soothing companionship? Is Jesus not a change agent at all? Does the Holy Spirit not live and pulse among us? Does God not hear and respond to our prayers in ways beyond our imagination?

What do *you* believe? What do *you* expect from prayer?

After all, Episcopal mystic Agnes Sanford says that the whole point of prayer is to expect something different. You have to expect, she says. You have to believe. "It's faith that unbinds the hands of Jesus," she says.

In fact, she once described Jesus as "standing in church services all over Christendom with his hands tied behind his back, unable to do any mighty works there because the ministers who led the services either didn't expect him to do them or didn't dare ask him to do them for fear he wouldn't or couldn't and that their own faith and the faith of their congregations would be threatened as the result."²

Well, speaking for myself, I feel ready to untie Jesus' hands and encourage him to get on with whatever the heck he intends to do, especially as regards this congregation. In fact, I expect it. I really do.

And what is it I expect? I'm not exactly sure, to be honest, Jesus being a loose cannon and all. But *something* beyond what you or I can do on our own. *Something* beyond what we can imagine.

² Frederick Buechner, Listening to Your Life, HarperCollins, New York, 1992, pp 41-42.

And why do I expect it? Well, during these last months God's been relentlessly chipping away at my resistance to a different way of going about being church. And God told Session to envision 200 members in this church by 2012, to anticipate excellent worship and music and education and mission to help with that. But perhaps more important even than any of those things, God seems to have laid the expectation on my heart. We don't use that kind of language much in this church. At least, I don't. But I'm telling you, that's my story and I'm stickin' to it, whether the leper gets healed or not.

Sound silly to you? Sanford remarks that prayer *can* be viewed as a sort of game, and if ridiculous seeming, than surely not nearly so ridiculous as so many of the other games we play, and generally a good bit more useful.

But what if God doesn't come through? What if we *don't* have 200 people in 2012? What if the leper *didn't* get healed? Certainly that's the story we're more familiar with.

In our book club's current tome, there's a moving testimony called "Damning the Disease, Not the Deity," by retired United Church of Christ minister, Bill Abernethy, who's been suffering with Parkinson's disease for decades. Abernethy speaks frankly of his angry conversations with God during which he asks, "If you can heal me, God, why don't you? You've certainly had an abundance of opportunities. You talk about how you are a God of healing, so why don't you make healing possible?"³

This goes on for some time until eventually Abernethy's anger lifts. "It's almost as though God would say things to me in a tone of voice that is immensely compassionate... in a way that makes me feel deeply a part of God's love," says

³ The Life of Meaning, Bob Abernethy and William Bole, Seven Stories Press, New York, 2007, p.92.

Abernethy. “I feel as though God must at least be responding, “I wish I could have done better for you, Bill.” And I could see God saying that without violating God’s omnipotence or whatever other words medieval theologians would have used. God would be saying, “I consider myself voluntarily limited by the limits of human understanding. And people don’t know yet how to do stem cells, so I have to wait a bit.”

Maybe that speaks to you; maybe not. But can you at least see how in prayer, the question changed for Abernethy from “why aren’t you doing what I want you to do?” to “hmm, God, what *are* you doing here?”

That’s the shift I anticipate for us here at Emory Church. “Hmm, God, what *are* you doing here?” ‘Cause I’m here to tell you, God’s sure doing *something!*

Mark’s story about Jesus’ healing of the leper raises many questions about prayer, about healing, about the power of God, about our faith, about how God works in our personal and corporate lives. Who of us does not struggle with the nature and purpose and effects of prayer? I am grateful for this community in which we’re invited to struggle together. The biggest challenge, I think, is to imagine a God who is “for us” whether or not our prayers are answered in the manner in which we want.

Those of you who knew Bonneau Dickson, remember how he used to say, “Well, I’m *for* you.” I always loved that. It always felt like, if Bonneau Dickson was “for” me, who could be against me?

As we struggle with the nature and purpose of prayer, can we believe that no matter what happens, God is still *for* us? Can we trust a God whose plan may or may not include our desires? Can we obey a Jesus who calls us to turn our lives upside down for him? Can we even attempt to satisfy Paul’s call to “pray without ceasing?” Or, in our case, even if we can’t imagine how on earth God’s going to come up with another

115 people in the coming 3 years to flesh out this particular body of Christ, can we yet trust and obey and pray and observe the ways the Holy Spirit is at work in our midst?

That's the challenge and I'm up for it. I hope you are.

All we know is that Session was given the vision of excellence in worship, education and mission, of a deepening experience of God's love, of an increasingly effective demonstration of God's love to our community and world, and of a membership of 200 by 2012. What we *don't* know is whether or not Jesus will choose to make this church grow. He could. He might. But will he? *You* could. *You* might. But *will* you?

All we really know is that the God we know through Jesus Christ is "for us," that God gave us a vision to work toward, and that each of us is expected to do our part toward that end. If you think otherwise, remember Jesus' primary message: repent and believe that God's Kingdom is coming near.

To the glory of God. Amen.