

A Healing: The Kingdom in Action Now!

Sermon on Mark 1:35-45

Sunday February 15, 2009

Trinity United, Ottawa

Rev. Ellie Barrington, M.Div.

“I do choose. Be made clean!”

So, Jesus proclaimed his new Kingdom. **“Yes we can!”**

In our Borg study group a couple of weeks back, we were invited to choose one biblical story of Jesus that we would most like to enter into. Someone said they’s like to witness one of Jesus’ healings, to see how a miracle happened.

Aren’t we all fascinated by miracle healings? Even as we seriously doubt that such events actually occurred, we secretly hope they still can. But remember how Jesus himself warned us not to be distracted by the miracles? He said, in effect “Pay attention to what I’m really about.”

So what is the real meaning of this ‘miracle healing’ story? It is about Jesus making a risky, social gesture that launched his Kingdom of God into the here and now. Jesus’ touch contradicts the crippling purity laws of Temple Judaism that had excluded and abused too many. When he reaches out to touch to a leper ‘where he is at’ - in social isolation caused by prejudice and fear of contagion - this compassion in action kick-starts the healing of a community.

In our translation we heard that when confronted by the leper, Jesus was ‘moved with pity.’ But other translations of the Greek say he was ‘moved to anger.’ That he was so outraged by the Temple authorities ill treating such people, that Jesus felt compelled to reach across the boundary of disease and touch an ‘untouchable.’ A very consequential act!

You see, when Jesus touched that leper, according to the purity laws, he himself

became an ‘untouchable.’ So when he sent the healed leper off to challenge the Temple authorities to declare him clean, Jesus asked that his healing touch not be mentioned around town. Once the word got out, “Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country.”

When Jesus said “I do choose!” to touch that man, he effectively traded social status with the leper. The wonderful consequence of his risk was that others found the courage to break the purity laws too. They ‘came out to him’ in the countryside,’ in spite of his ‘untouchable’ status. Radical change was afoot, as people broke the rules, coming to Jesus ‘from every quarter.’

People usually only take the kind of courageous risk Jesus did, when we are too outraged to put up with the oppression and injustice we see, any longer. In a book I’m reading, a woman in a concentration camp, outraged by seeing a girl beaten for the crime of menstruating - being unclean - makes herself a target by attacking the cruel guard. The author wrote of that woman’s subsequent death: “She saw just one act of cruelty too many, and she was killed for her compassion.” I think Jesus acted like that. His Kingdom courage was fuelled by the outrage born of human compassion.

How often do we let ourselves feel our compassion deeply enough to react against injustice? Aren’t we all called to take actions that risk our security and comfort, when we just can’t stand to see people treated so badly? I wish I could do it more often! Because that is how Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God. By refusing to collude with the rules that oppressed people. By putting himself on the frontlines of healing the prejudice and oppression in his society.

You know the slogan “Be the Change?” In this story, Jesus is modelling how to “Be the Kingdom”. So which ‘untouchables’ are we willing to reach out to - and be touched by? In the poem Frontlines, it is made clear that the risky work of reaching out brings about reciprocal change. As with Jesus and leper, both healer and healed

are changed, and their changing each other ripples out to make the community more whole, more healed.

We all have opportunities to participate in radical acts of healing our society, one by one. And our individual acts do sometimes seem to have miraculous consequences. Children often instinctively act in the Kingdom way by befriending the bullied and the social outcast in class. Remember cooties? How we feared the contagion of relating with the fat kid or the one with funny clothes? Some kids refused to call out the taunts and wear their 'cootie vaccinations'. And some even had the wisdom to include the bully - equally in need of social healing. We can encourage kids by doing just that, ourselves.

We can refuse to hide behind the social conventions that support our discomfort with someone from any excluded group - , people on welfare, gays and lesbians, our own Indians, people of colour, Muslim people, addicts, persons with HIV/AIDS and the mentally ill. Whenever we reach out and touch one of them, inviting them to be one of us and touch us deeply, we make Kingdom come.

We can also refuse to tolerate the impossible rules and regulations that many refugees face when seeking the basic safety of asylum in Canada. We can drive over to Carlington and spend an afternoon with isolated seniors of a 'different' social class. And learn to admire them. And be touched by their acceptance of us. There are so many opportunities, if we allow our human compassion to propel us to courageous action, like Jesus did.

As a church congregation, we can choose to be inclusive in new ways, thereby proclaiming this a Kingdom place, here and now. Here's an idea that came to me on e-mail. This Thursday, as you see in your bulletin, has been declared a Day of Pink. You recall the pink triangles and yellow stars that people were forced to wear in Nazi Germany, targetting them for ill treatment as gays and Jews? Remember how some other courageous people chose to put on those odious symbols themselves, to

confound the German authorities? I think that is the root of this attention-getting social action. So this Thursday, I invite you to join in wearing pink, to proclaim your Kingdom position against prejudices of all kinds. Wear pink, and talk about prejudices - maybe even the ones you suspect yourself of? Did you know that one of the subtler signs of prejudice is just feeling 'uncomfortable' around someone who is of a different group than you? Like people who didn't understand the disease once felt around lepers.

@9 downstairs this morning, we watched clips from a movie called 'Lars and the Real Girl.' I love this movie because it shows a church taking a big risk to reach out and help heal an 'untouchable man.' Lars was a painfully shy individual, living next to his brother and sister-in-law, but miles away from any intimacy. When persuaded to come for dinner and finally introduce his 'new girlfriend,' he arrives with a blow-up doll named 'Lars and the Real Girl', whom he proceeds to talk and relate with as if she were real. A wise therapist encourages Lars' brother and sister-in-law to go along with Lar's delusion, which is this isolated man's way of practising relating to a most unthreatening 'woman.'

There is a wonderful scene in which the church group is persuaded to go along with Lar's delusion too. So Lar's 'girlfriend doll' is welcomed in the pews as if she were a real woman, and then adopted by the whole community. Against all social norms, the church and then the whole town, met Lars where he was at. They risked being ridiculous, they actively colluded, in order to help him.. You have to see the ending. I'd call it a healing miracle, for a whole community. Real Kingdom stuff...in the here and now.

Miracles are great. We all want to be in on the scenes where Jesus performed them. But perhaps what he would have us take from this story, is that we can be miracle workers too, if we will choose to be the Kingdom here and now.

Whoever is victim of prejudice, bullying, racism, oppression, can we feel our

compassion with them? Will we let our human outrage against their hurting rise and overcome our fear of reaching out and touching? Each time one of us says “Yes I will!” we are all touched by Jesus .We can enact the Kingdom miracle of an end to prejudice, starting here. Yes we can!