

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 12, 2012
The Rev. Canon David Lovelace

The Gospel writer Mark tells us that Jesus began his ministry like a racehorse leaving the starting gate. Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River before going into the wilderness to wrestle with his identity. Wasting no time following the wilderness experience, Jesus invites a community to share in his ministry. Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, James and John to leave their profitable fishing business and join him in fishing for people. Jesus does not slow down. He travels with his newly formed band of followers to Capernaum where on the Sabbath he teaches in the synagogue. First century Jews gathered at the synagogue to study Scripture and participate in the traditions of their faith. Those assembled were astonished that Jesus taught as one with authority superior to that of their teachers.

As Jesus was teaching, a man with an unclean spirit challenged him. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” Jesus called the unclean spirit out of the man. Those present were even more astonished that Jesus not only taught as one with authority but had command over unclean spirits. As people do, they began to talk about what they had seen and heard.

Jesus and his band of followers moved on going to the house of Simon and Andrew. Upon their arrival, they discover that Simon’s mother in law is in bed sick with a fever. Jesus went to see her and healed her of the fever. That news spread like a wildfire. Now remember this is first century Galilee, there are no cell phones, no Ipads, no Facebook, no text messaging. By evening Mark says the entire city had gathered around the door to the house bringing the sick and possessed for Jesus to heal. Can you imagine the first flash mob scene as people pressed against one another trying to see Jesus and pushing the sick among them toward the front to be healed?

Jesus was exhausted. He had called together a community, he began his first world tour, he taught in the synagogues, healed all the sick who had been brought to him and cast out demons from those possessed. Early in the morning while it is still dark Jesus slips out of the house to find a place where he can be alone to pray and replenish himself. When Simon and his companions wake up they discover Jesus has gone. Frantically they begin to search for him. When they finally find him, Jesus says, “time to move on.” Mark tells us they traveled throughout Galilee

teaching in the synagogues and casting out demons.

This morning we find a leper seeking out Jesus' healing power. In the biblical world, any of a number of skin diseases could be identified as leprosy. Leprosy rendered a person unclean much less contagious. The disease caused the suffered to be quarantined on the outskirts of town. A leper was ceremonially unclean, meaning there were certain laws about how this person was to behave and to be treated by the community. You will find these laws in the Book of Leviticus. A leper was to live a solitary life outside the boundaries of the community. The community was not to interact with a leper and restricted from touching a person with the disease. Leprosy was considered punishment for sin and to be cured was to be made a complete person again.

Jesus is traveling with his band of followers when this man afflicted with leprosy seeks him out. Begging Jesus he said, "If you choose, you can make me clean." He is a man who has been condemned to live his life separated from his family and the community. A man pushed beyond the boundaries of the acceptable due to circumstances beyond his control. A man who has to beg in order to sustain himself, knowing that this is how his life is going to be until he dies from the disease or old age. This man does not just ask Jesus to cure him of the disease, he begs Jesus to make him clean so he can resume his life.

Jesus moved with pity for this outcast man, reaches out his hand, touching the man, he said, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately the man is made clean, made whole again, given a new lease on life.

To the enlightened mind, stories like this raise questions. Could Jesus really heal by speaking a few words or touching someone? What is the correlation between faith and physical healing of the Jesus stories? Did Jesus' healings really happen or did writers like Mark share stories like this one to make a point? As Jesus' ministry continues he will again and again step outside the boundaries of religion and culture to bring salvation. In this story the leper is not only made clean but he is restored to his family, his community, give a new life by being made whole.

Jesus sends the man to do what is required by law. "Go, show yourself to the priest, offer the sacrifice required in the law of Moses so the priest can certify you are clean." Recall the law of Leviticus is very clear about how to treat lepers. Jesus is instructing the man to go and do what is required by law so he can be restored to his community.

“By the way, don’t tell anyone.” Jesus said to the leper. Don’t tell anyone how God has restored you to new life. Don’t tell anyone how you have been returned to your family and your rightful place in the community. Don’t tell anyone about the loving compassion shown to you because of your faith. Don’t tell anyone. Jesus must have been the first Episcopalian.

My entire life has been spent practicing the Christian faith as it is lived by people who call themselves Episcopalians. I have been steeped in the stories of the Christian faith through the formation opportunities of the Episcopal Church. I have been fed physically and spiritually by the Episcopal Church. I have been ministered to by the community that identifies itself as the Episcopal Church. I have shared in meaningful ministry to others as a part of the Episcopal Church.

I would like nothing better than to have the opportunity to share that which provides meaning in my life with others. I looked forward to assistance from the great minds of the church as we Episcopalians declared a Decade of Evangelism. I got excited about the 20/20 incentive that was to double the size of the Episcopal Church by 2020. Look around you – does it appear the church is growing? Statistics tell us that mainline denominations are declining. We talk about declining birth rates, being spiritual but not religious. We listen to our more evangelical neighbors talk about their churches and how they are growing. We drive by parking lots of non-traditional churches filled with cars and we wonder, “what are they doing that we are not doing?” Could it be that we take much to seriously Jesus instruction to the man cleansed of leprosy, “Don’t tell anyone.”

But the man could not keep the good news to himself. He was busting to tell anyone who would listen how God had touched him and restored his life. He just had to talk about his faith, the compassion he experienced, the hope restored because he took a risk for the sake of faith.

I know there are powerful faith stories in this room today. I know that God has touched your life, our lives in powerful restorative ways. I know that God continues to act to bring new life and fills our lives with joyous hope. I know the love and compassion of this particular congregation that supports each of us along life’s journey. Proclaim it freely. Do not be ashamed to share that which has so powerfully filled your life with the loving grace of God. Invite others to come share in the gracious hospitality and compassion of your faith community.

The man went out and proclaimed freely what God had done for him so Jesus could no longer go into a town openly but had to stay in the country because people were coming to find him from every quarter.