

Epiphany 6
February 12, 2012
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Before we look specifically at today's gospel I think some background would be helpful! So here we go!

If there's one thing that's uncontested about Jesus it's that he was a healer. As one scholar has said, "mighty acts are attributed to Jesus by every known strand of tradition about him including those that are hostile". We can get hung up on these healings because they get called miracles. For us, in our post-modern, post enlightenment, scientific world, miracles of that sort don't happen.

What's truly ironic, then, is that, in Jesus' time, miracles were far less important than the wisdom and sanctity of the one who performed them. Jesus' renown wasn't that he performed miracles, including miraculous healings, it was that these acts were acts of grace, offering hope and liberation to the afflicted, done in response to human need. They were works of the coming Kingdom of God. Even for his listeners, it was what the miracles said, not what they did, that was important.

That's why for the Evangelists – and, for that matter, for those who encountered Jesus – the non-miraculous preaching of the good news to the poor was just as important as a miraculous healing.

That's an important point for us, too – the proclamation of Jesus' life-transforming message by example and word is a work of the coming kingdom, and nothing that we could do or say is more important than this proclamation. When we perform acts of grace, offering hope and liberation to the afflicted, when we respond to human need, we proclaim the kingdom of God.

We haven't even talked about today's gospel passage, and we've talked about what's central to the whole gospel! Perhaps I should stop here.

So what about today's gospel? What about leprosy? The response of Judaism to leprosy wasn't unique – any sickness made you unclean – you couldn't go and worship at the temple, for instance. And if your sickness wasn't superficially obvious then you had a responsibility to proclaim your sickness by wearing torn clothes, by letting your hair hang loose, and by crying out "unclean, unclean" when you approached anyone. You had to live outside "the camp".

Now undoubtedly there were very good reasons why this sort of behavior was required. In a culture virtually devoid of any pharmacological remedy a sick person could kill everyone one in the community simply because that disease could be transmitted so easily with no remedy. That's what happened – in reverse – to Rachel's tribe in B.C. – when us Europeans came there were 10,000 Shakan. Within a matter of years that was reduced to just over 200 by the spread of European diseases against which those First Nations peoples had no bodily defense.

But then there's this: to that entirely logical and quite wise requirement that a sick person be separated from the community was added a moral layer. In much of 1st Century Mediterranean

society it was believed that if a person got ill it was a punishment from the gods for something they had done. All suffering was deserved. – it was “just desserts” for something you must have done, even if, on the surface, you lived an blameless and exemplary life. Judaism was no exception to this belief.

So when Jesus was approached by a leper he could have been expected to avoid him. And now the story gets interesting! The NRSV translation says that Jesus was “moved with pity” but that version comes from the less reliable early manuscript. The more reliable manuscript has this, that Jesus was “indignant”. No “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” here - he was not a happy camper! Why? Because while he didn't care about issues of purity he knew that those he was preaching to did, and if they found out that he had touched a leper then it might impinge on his preaching mission. That's why, in part, Jesus tells the leper not to say anything to anyone!!

Well so far we have a very interesting 1st Century story. It has to do with a miraculous healing, and a non-21st Century view of sickness. That's another way of saying that, if we choose, we can place the story safely 2000 years away from us, and go home thinking how nice that man Jesus was, in spite of that awful, bad leper wanting Jesus to make himself unclean to help out someone who everyone else would have rejected out of hand.

So let's make this story a little more contemporary. You're the main character. You're known as a very forgiving person, a generous person, someone who can see goodness even in the darkest of souls. As you're out walking a figure comes toward you. When he's close enough you recognize him as Josh Powell – you know who he is, don't you? He killed – at least – his two children, Charlie and Braden, himself, and, quite possibly, his wife, too. He kneels at your feet and says: “if you choose, you can help me to be whole again”.

This is a scenario entirely consistent with stories of what happened to Jesus. Remember that in Matthew 9 Jesus cuts right past the physical malady and straight to the perceived moral failing and says to the person asking for healing, “your sins are forgiven you”.

How should you – how should we, as people of faith, respond? It's really hard, isn't it? Much easier to admire Jesus forgiving sin 2000 years ago, but it's a whole other matter when we come to Josh Powell.

That brings us back to Jesus and the leper. I suspect part of Jesus' rather snippy response was because the leper here shows no sign at all of repentance, something that, only a few verses ago, Mark has pointed to as a pre-condition for forgiveness and, thus, of being healed.

Do Josh Powell's emails, and his brief phone-call to his sister, constitute repentance? He said, in all of them, “I'm sorry”.

I believe that asking if he repented is the wrong question. It really isn't up to us to make that judgment, because if we do, we invite judgement on our lives to.

And, in fact, asking if we should forgive him is the wrong question too – a question we shouldn't even ask. Why? Because if we are Christians we can never ask “should I forgive someone?” we

already know the answer because – according to Matthew (18:22) Jesus spoke it: he said “you should forgive without limit (which is what 70 X 7 means)”.

Our willingness to forgive in any situation is entirely about us. It may change our relationship with the person we’re forgiving, but that’s secondary and, in the greater scheme of things, rather unimportant – though it may turn out to be a blessing for all of us. Whether a person is ultimately forgiven is in God’s hands, not ours – which is certainly what Jesus means in that Matthew passage.

Forgiving, like healing, was, for Jesus, an act of grace and a sign of the kingdom. When we forgive we’re performing an act of grace; our willingness to forgive without limit is, like Jesus’ healing miracles, and his proclamation of Good News to the poor, a work of the coming kingdom. So keep on working for the coming of the kingdom! Amen.