

BORDER CROSSING

Jeremiah 7:1-7; Mark 1:40-45
A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham
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The man approaches Jesus out of desperation. As a leper he had been relegated to life as an outcast, an untouchable. Beyond the discomforts of his insidious skin disease, he had endured social and religious isolation, all of it specified in the holiness laws of Leviticus. The leper, said the law, “shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (Lev. 13:45-46) And so the man had been isolated from family and friends, excluded from public worship, and removed from any human contact, for anyone who came in contact with him would also be rendered “unclean.”¹ It is distressing how often our concerns for purity put borders and boundaries on the extension of simple human kindness and compassion.

Yet, having heard of Jesus’ work elsewhere, this leper ignores the law’s restrictions and rushes to kneel at the feet of Jesus, and he boldly claims, “If you *choose*, you can make me clean.”

Jesus then does two very important things. First, he touches the man. He reaches out to him and touches him and says, “I *do* choose. Be made clean.” Putting himself at risk of having to join the leper colony, Jesus crosses the border the Torah had set between them and touches the man. As one scholar says, that touch is of great significance. “Jesus did not minister long distance.... His work of forgiving brought him into contact with sinners; his work of lifting placed him among the fallen; his words of encouragement were spoken among the hopeless; his healing put him in contact with the diseased....”²

The touch that may seem like an inconsequential detail in Mark’s account actually has profound meaning in the context of Mark’s culture. It shows us the kind of person, the kind of Christ, Jesus intends to be. He is the Christ who comes to serve, not to be served. He is the kind of Christ who will cross borders and boundaries to touch lepers and embrace those at the margins. “All the way to the cross Jesus will be trying to get those who think, ‘where the messiah is, there will be no misery’ to accept a new [paradigm] – ‘where there is misery, there is the messiah.’”³ And so he reaches across the border and boundary of disease to touch an untouchable.

I said that Jesus did two very important things before sending the man on his way. The first was his touch. The second may seem a bit odd to us. He sent the man to a priest to be ritually cleansed. If he was healed, we may wonder, why did the man need a priest? The answer is simple; this was not a private blessing. Jesus knew that without the ritual

¹ Douglas Hare, *Mark*, Westminster Bible Companion, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1996, 33-34.

² Fred Craddock, et al., *Preaching Through the Christian Year – B*, Valley Forge, Trinity Press International, 1993, 103.

³ Craddock, et al., 103.

cleansing, the man could not be welcomed back into the community's life. His concern was not simply with the man's physical health; he also wanted him restored in every social, religious and economic venue as well. He understood that healing on one level only would not be sufficient, that his restorative touch had to extend further, to mend the fabric of his relationships. Our healing may begin internally, but it's completed in community.⁴

One of my pastor-friends, Robin White, was for some years the pastor of a church in Wilmington, Delaware. Early in her tenure there, folks warned her about one of the church's teenagers, a troubled boy name Conrad. Conrad was an angry, disruptive 15-year-old who'd been expelled from school for drugs, outbursts in class, and verbal abuse of teachers. He'd also been kicked out of Church School. His mother had all but given up on him. The boy had been in and out of drug rehab centers. He smoked, cursed constantly, and his pants hung too low. Other parents just didn't want their own kids around him.

But Conrad came to the church every morning for some private tutoring, and Robin said that before long, he began appearing at her study door. At first, he came under the guise of wanting a gum ball from the gum ball machine she had on her desk. But then, he started plopping down in a chair and talking with Robin about the latest computer games or rap music. After a few minutes of listening, Robin would say she had to get back to work, and Conrad would give her a grin and unfold his long lanky body and say, "I need a cigarette." And he was gone till the next morning.

Soon, against all odds, Conrad started coming to church on Sundays with his mother. But he didn't sit with her. He would stroll down the aisle during the opening hymn holding up his pants. He sat in the front pew by himself until the scripture reading, when he would get up and saunter back down the aisle and out the door. In the middle of the sermon, back down the aisle he came. Every Sunday.

To the displeasure of some of the congregation, Robin asked Conrad to be an usher. At the least, she believed, he would be going up and down the aisle for a reason. She fielded quite a few complaints about the way he walked and dressed as he ushered. But soon the youth group advisors took an interest in Conrad, too. They invited him to youth events, even though he always had an excuse. Robin said that she and the leaders tried hard to get him to go on an overnight retreat. He said he wasn't coming because he had other plans. But on the evening of the overnight, Conrad showed up with his pillow and sleeping bag. "I changed my mind," he grinned.

The following Sunday, Conrad was back in church. So was a woman named Sarah, an elderly and faithful member of the congregation who also sat toward the front. She had sat there with her husband, Ed, every Sunday for forty years. But Ed's funeral had been the Tuesday before. The opening hymn that day was *A Mighty Fortress*. Robin says she looked out and saw Sarah sitting alone, bent over in grief, tears flowing freely. [About] the same time, she spotted Conrad ambling down the center aisle. As he walked by Sarah, Conrad caught a glimpse of her out of the corner

⁴ Carla Pratt Keyes, "Bridging the Distance," sermon preached February 12, 2006 at the St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Tucker, Georgia.

of his eye. He stopped, whirled his long body around, hiked up his pants, and slid into the pew next to her. He draped his arm around her shoulders and held her close as the congregation sang, *“God’s truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever.”*⁵

Much of the time, what we need most is the love and embrace of a community. Goodness, we need each other. Jesus understood that, as he touched the leper, so he sent him to the priest. And Conrad, who had known his own pain, understood it when he slid in next to Sarah and touched her grief. Opportunities for us to demonstrate such understanding arise almost every day. In such matters we almost always have a choice to make. “If you choose,” the leper said, “you can make me clean.” Who knows what choices we will be asked to make? Sometimes, to be sure, such opportunities and choices present themselves to us clearly and unambiguously, and the saints of God know unequivocally what they must do, and so rally to acts of compassion and kindness. At other times, the choices present themselves in disguise, cloaked in ambiguity. Sometimes we may not even recognize such choices for what they are until they’re gone... or almost gone.

I heard Fred Craddock tell once of being invited to give some lectures at the University of Winnipeg, up on the prairies of Manitoba. It was late September, and so Fred called his host about the weather. “Well,” said the host, “it’s too early still for the heavy stuff, but bring a windbreaker.” So, Fred did.

He got to Winnipeg the next day and gave his first lecture that evening. Fred said he noticed when he came out of the lecture hall that there were snow flurries in the air, but his host was reassuring. “It’s too early for the heavy stuff,” he said. The next morning, though, when he looked out the window, there was snow everywhere... maybe two or three feet of snow. The phone rang. It was his host. “Wow!” he said. “This storm really caught us by surprise. The whole city is just shut down. We’ve had to cancel your morning lecture. I can’t even get to you to take you out for breakfast.”

The man did tell Fred about a little diner just a couple of blocks away, so Fred dressed (“I put on my windbreaker,” Fred said). A short while later, after traipsing through the snow in the face of a bitter wind, he found the diner. He stepped inside, and somebody shouted, “Close the door!” He took the one empty stool at the counter, and sat down. A man in a greasy apron came up and said, “What do you want?” “I’d like a menu,” Fred responded.

“Menu won’t do you no good,” the man said with a scowl. “All we’ve got is soup.”

“Well, OK, soup then,” Fred said, “and a cup of coffee.” And he confessed that at that moment he began to scowl about being stuck in that September snow in Winnipeg.

The man in the greasy apron brought the soup fairly quickly, but it looked strange, Fred said. It was gray soup, the color of a mouse. Fred tasted it, but almost spit it out. It tasted terrible, he said, like dirty dishwater. So, he said, I put my hands over my soup, just to keep warm.

⁵ Robin White, in a paper presented in 1995 to the Moveable Feast preaching group.

About then the door opened, and the same person yelled, “Close the door!” and in walked a frail wisp of a woman, dressed in light clothing, with only a plastic raincoat for cover. She was shivering against the cold, but someone moved over, and she sat down. And the man in the apron asked her, “What do you want?” She asked only for a glass of water.

“Look, lady,” the man said, “I’ve got paying customers here. You have to order something.” “Can I just stay here for a moment to get warm?” she pleaded, but he was unmoved. “Order or get out.” “Please, sir,” she said, “Just for a moment.” But by now, said Fred, the man in the greasy apron was getting angry, and he yelled at her, “Order or get out!” And slowly, sadly, she got up and started for the door.

Then, in the sudden silence, the most remarkable thing happened. First one, then another customer got up and started for the door as well. Then others, and within a moment, everyone in the diner got up and was heading for the door. I got up, Fred said, even though I wasn’t sure what was happening. Then the man behind the counter yelled, “Oh, all right, for heaven’s sake. She can stay.” And with that, said Fred, everyone came back and sat down. The woman sat down, too, and the man behind the counter brought her a bowl of soup.

I turned to the man next to me, said Fred, and I asked, “Who is that woman?” “Never seen her before,” the man said, “but if she ain’t welcome here, ain’t nobody welcome.”

Fred said he watched the woman, and she began to drink down her soup in gulps, as though she hadn’t eaten for days. Then he looked around, and all the other customers were eating their soup, too. Fred said, I decided to taste that soup again. And you know, on second taste, it wasn’t all that bad. In fact, it tasted pretty good. I liked that soup, he said. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to taste like something familiar. I thought, I’ve tasted this soup somewhere before. And then it hit me. Why, this soup tastes just like... it reminds me of... it tastes just like... bread and wine.

Fred said it was a remarkable moment, really. I just wished it had happened in a church, he said. I just wished it had happened in a church.

Well, friends, you know something? It has. It *has* happened in the church. It has happened in *this* church. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. And it still happens here in every act of gracious compassion and kindness, in every deed of uncommon hospitality and grace, whenever people of faith let go of their easy assumptions, step out from behind their comfortable borders and boundaries, and respond with acts of kindness and hospitality and solidarity... when they *choose* to act with a compelling compassion that prompts them to follow this One who touched the leper... and broke bread with sinners... and who helped his followers more clearly to understand that “where misery is, there is the Messiah.”