

No More Double Disabling
Leviticus 13:45-46, 14:1-20; Mark 1:40-45

Disability Awareness Sunday
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Today we call it Hanson's disease. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, there are only about 6,500 cases of Hanson's disease in the United States, about half of which actually require treatment. It is not a highly communicable disease, and it is easily treated with a standard antibiotic. However, the Department of Health and Human Resources says that Hanson's disease "remains the most misunderstood human infectious disease." That's because in the days of the Bible it was called leprosy, and it carried a terrible stigma. As you heard from the book of Leviticus, a priest made the diagnosis of leprosy. It was a dreaded diagnosis because it was doubly disabling. Not only did you have the disease in a world without antibiotics; but far worse, the priest declared that you were unclean, impure, and you were banished from the community.

Today I want to talk about some things that may sound rather boring to some of you. It may be like watching a twenty-minute newscast. Something during the twenty minutes might strike you as important, but much of it will not. It's simply news. Others of you will hear what I say differently. You are the news. For those of you touched by disabilities, your own or that of someone you love, this may strike a very deep chord. You will understand double disabling and the physical, emotional, and spiritual toll it takes upon individuals and families.

To begin this journey, we must do something that feels unnatural. We must step back in time and try to understand the worldview of the first century. It was pre-modern and pre-scientific. Their knowledge of medicine and medical care was a mix of ignorance and superstition. In their worldview, "the gods" or demonic forces ruled all aspects of life, dispensing both protection and punishment. So if someone became sick, the people in the days of the Bible did not attribute the sickness to a virus or bacteria. No, a "capricious divine being" or a "malicious demon" caused their sicknesses. That is why they went to see a priest. As you heard, the cure for illnesses also involved the spiritual realm. They had to offer sacrifices and perform

various rituals to appease the gods and to ward off demons. The first century Hebrews had no concept of bacterial infections, viruses, or mental illness. And, Jesus shared the worldview of his time (R. Alan Culpepper, *Smyth & Helwys Commentary: Mark*, p. 67).

We see this played out in the story from Mark 1. The careful reader of Mark's gospel suspects at the very beginning that something deliberate is occurring. In the first fifty-seven verses of this gospel, there are five healing narratives. No birth narrative. No "in the beginning was the word." Mark begins his gospel by presenting Jesus as the great healer of humankind. The man in the fourth healing story, the one with Hanson's disease or leprosy, was a benefactor of Jesus' healing mission. Mark presents this man as desperate, kneeling before Jesus and begging for help. His choice of words, I'm convinced, is critical to this story. He begged Jesus saying, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Notice that he doesn't say, "you can make me *well*." He says "clean." Your translation may read "pure." In the worldview of the first century, leprosy was thought to be punishment by God. You apparently had committed some grave sin or transgression, and God or the gods were punishing you with leprosy. It was a terrible, terrible diagnosis because lepers were double disabled. Not only was he or she sick; he or she also was unclean, impure, religiously unacceptable in the community of the faithful. Here's why. In their belief system, spiritual impurity was a threat to the community of faith. Uncleanness was contagious. You yourself could become unclean by touching someone who was declared unclean or by touching the clothing of someone who was unclean. Ironically the disease of leprosy itself was not highly contagious, but the religious implications, the spiritual uncleanness, were highly contagious. Therefore, the leper could not be tolerated in the community of the faithful.

So as you might guess, the laws governing people with leprosy were strict. Many writers have observed that lepers were treated like an "it," a non-person. For example, a leper was not permitted to enter the Temple or any of the area surrounding the Temple. They were required to live alone in an unpopulated area, away from their families and friends. As a sign of their leprous condition, their clothes were to be torn and their hair kept disheveled. They were required to cover their upper lip and call out "unclean, unclean" any time others approached. To have a priest declare that you were leprous, in a state of religious impurity, meant that you faced a life of isolation and destitution.

All this makes the behavior of Jesus and this man with leprosy all the more significant. In this story from Mark, the man violated the law when he approached Jesus. He didn't stay in his isolation. He didn't cover his upper lip and cry out "unclean, unclean." No, this desperate non-person approached Jesus, fell on his knees, and begged to be made clean, pure. What happens next is very important. My translation says that Jesus was moved with "pity." However, my translation has a footnote at the bottom of the page. I'll bet yours does too. It says this, "Other ancient authorities read *anger*." Some ancient manuscripts of Mark say that Jesus was moved not with pity but with anger. I'm convinced that that was the original word Mark used to describe Jesus. Later editors were uncomfortable with Jesus' anger and substituted with word pity. Jesus was moved with anger that day, not at the man with leprosy, but at what his world had done to the man with leprosy. He wasn't an "it," a non-person who could be banished from the community. He was a man with feeling, hopes, a family, friends, and most likely a belief in his God. No other healing story in either gospel evokes anger from Jesus. But here Jesus was angry at a social, cultural, and religious system that double disabled this man and drove him into desperation.

Now look at what Jesus did. He did the unthinkable. He reached out and touched the leprous man.

Earlier in this same chapter, Jesus healed a man with a demon *without touching him*. Here, though, Jesus crossed a forbidden barrier and deliberately touched the man with leprosy, taking his uncleanness upon himself. Jesus touched him and spoke these words, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Not *well*. Be made clean, pure. This text is not primarily about being cured. It is about being made clean. It's healing in a more profound sense.

Mark says that immediately the leprosy was gone and the man was clean. Perhaps still angry, Jesus told the man to say nothing to anyone about what had just happened. Mark uses strong language here. Jesus told him to go to the priest who had declared him unclean and show the priest that he now was clean. Jesus said that that would be his testimony "to them," to the priests and the whole system that had double disabled him and treated him like a non-person.

But you can imagine the ecstatic joy this man must have felt. How do you just return to normal after this? How do you just walk around as if nothing had happened, after someone gave you your life back? “He proclaimed it freely,” Mark says. And who can blame him? The victim became the proclaimer. And of course, the news spread fast, so fast that, interestingly, Jesus could not go into the towns openly. Now, why not? Why couldn’t Jesus go into the towns? He had it. When he touched the man with leprosy, Jesus caught the uncleanness. Not Hanson’s disease because it was not highly contagious. Jesus, the Son of God, became ritually, religiously, unclean, and therefore contagious. He took the man’s uncleanness upon himself, so the religious officials would not allow Jesus into their towns. And so the desperate people, the non-persons, those who would fall on their knees and beg, left the towns, Mark says, and went to Jesus in the wilderness.

Wow! What a story! What a man, that Jesus of Nazareth!

This text, coming from a pre-modern, pre-scientific worldview, reminds us that some things don’t change. We always have had and likely always will have people with disabilities. That’s simply reality. They are our family members, our friends and co-workers, neighbors, and fellow church members. In fact, if the statistics are accurate, one fourth of us will be disabled for some period in our lifetime. But that’s not all this text does. This text also gives us the example of the great healer of humankind who became angry at the social and religious disabling of the disabled. He became indignant when the disabled were stripped of their personhood, when they were denied their legitimate place in community, and when they were stigmatized by bad religion. This example of Jesus is important, especially when you are the news.

No more double disabling. The disability is hard enough. Let us walk with the great healer of humankind of extend a hand of help and encouragement to all who are in need. Let us ensure that there are no “its” among us.

Closing Prayer

May the healing had of Jesus of Nazareth rest upon us all. Amen.