

Being Cleansed by Jesus
Mark 1:40-45, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27
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Often we are drawn to stories like “The Ugly Duckling”, “Beauty and the Beast” and “Snow White”. Stories where the main character does not fit in, is teased, reject and outcast. In these stories, the main character will eventually discover their inner beauty and they are welcomed into community.

Often we are drawn to stories that feature a person who loses the love of their life and they become miserable. Yet, in the end, love triumphs all. They discover their love, become beautiful once again, and of course live happily ever after.

What do these type of stories stir up in you? What moral do you hear in them? Do you identify more with the character who is outcast, who has lost their beauty and their ability to be loved and are trying to find their way? Or do you see yourself as one of the judging characters? Maybe you see yourself as one of the characters that are trying to help the outcast? The truth is that at times we are the outcast, other times we judge and still other times we help others.

The gospel of Mark proclaims. **Mark 1:40-45_40** **“A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to Jesus from everywhere”**

In the days of our scripture, a leper was the ultimate outcast. Leprosy was a general term that encompassed a variety of physical diseases. These diseases were greatly feared. Most believed that touching a leper would result in you getting the disease. Therefore lepers were excluded from the community and driven out of town. They struggled to survive in isolation. Lepers had to wear torn clothes, let the hair of their head be disheveled and cry out “unclean, unclean” whenever anyone passed by them. Often rocks were thrown at them to keep them away from any paths or places where a healthy person

may venture. Only ritually “clean” people could enter a place of worship, therefore, a leper was definitely prohibited from entering any church. All religious leaders were strictly prohibited from touching a leper. Taken from lepers was every aspect of community such as family, friends, social gatherings, work and the like. Many regarded leprosy as punishment for sin. Often a funeral was held as soon as family discovered that their relative was a leper for a leper was considered to be dead. A leper was the ultimate ugly duckling, beast and in essence were buried alive although no one would ever consider putting them in a glass case, visiting them, or even throwing a flower in their direction.

How are you outcast? What diseases do you have? How are you isolated? What loves have you lost? Do you sometimes feel ugly, rejected, alone, afraid, sad? You and I, everyone, is the leper in our gospel account. All of us are hurting, excluded and imperfect in some way.

The leper had hope. Despite their horrible life and unanswered prayers they believed in God. Despite their painful debilitating disease and imminent death they believed God had the power to heal them. Despite being hated they believed God loved them, that God would welcome them into a loving community.

The leper came to Jesus. Try to imagine what a monumental ordeal it was just to get to Jesus. Cutting your hair alone, stealing clothes and making a disguise, not to mention the immense pain there must be in walking upright with a normal stride. Despite their best effort they were recognized as a leper. Undeterred, they would carry on as people would scatter and pelt them with rocks. Can you imagine the fear they had to overcome? The guilt they struggled with knowing that they may touch someone and infect them with the disease. The mental gymnastics to push aside all the hurtful words declaring they are not good enough, that they are sinful and undeserving of healing. Imagine the risk in approaching Jesus, who was clearly prohibited by the law from having any interaction with them. Can you imagine the amount of hopeful faith in Jesus that it took for the leper to go to Jesus?

After reaching Jesus the leper kneels. Kneeling is a form of worship. The leper says, "If you choose, you can make me clean." This is an affirmation of faith, a creed, a statement of belief. It reveals that the leper knows Jesus, that they believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, capable of performing miracles, trusting God's compassionate love to make them clean.

The leper is bold, asking for much more than mere healing of their disease. The leper asked to be made clean. The leper desired to be cleansed so that they could be

welcomed back into community. In asking to be made clean they were asking for the love of family and friends to be restored.

Jesus was moved with compassion. Jesus more than loved the leper. Jesus felt all of the leper's pain in his heart and all of the leper's doubts in his mind. Jesus fully connected with the leper taking on all of their burdens.

Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out his hand and touched the leper. In touching the leper Jesus reveals that the healing power of God is stronger than any disease. Jesus violated numerous religious laws and health care laws in touching the leper revealing that loving another is always more important than the law.

Jesus said, "Be made clean" and then instructed the leper to "show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded", in so doing, this person would by law be included into the faith and community. Jesus restored this person to community revealing that love is stronger than hate.

Whenever you are tempted to judge, stop and have compassion. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Try to see matters from their perspective. You may still disagree with them however you can identify with them in their pain and struggle. We are disciples of Jesus. We are called to follow Jesus' example to have compassion for everyone, even the most outcast, sinful, despised person in the world. We are called to love them and work to unite them into community. We are called to love them even if our culture and laws, even if the church, commands us to exclude them. Loving and serving others is infinitely more important than any force that hinders you from loving and serving.

Jesus cleansing the leper was a transformation, a resurrection and considered to be as significant as raising a person from the dead. Jesus, filled with compassion, continually stepped outside the boundaries of religious and social conventions to bring salvation, healing and community. Jesus refused to accept a narrow and rigid attitude, belief, or orthodoxy, which hampered in any way, love and service to another, even the most commonly rejected outcast.

Many like a tame Jesus, a lover, healer and resurrector. How do you feel about the wildness of Jesus filled with compassion, breaking expectations, laws, century old religious traditions to bring people you dislike back into community? A bold Jesus that calls you to partner with God in healing, welcoming and restoring? A disruptive Jesus that declares that true peace and harmony will only be attained on earth when we are able to include everyone in community?

God's love, compassion and power are supreme. Pastor H. King Oehmig writes, "Jesus held an unwavering conviction that disease was not necessary to God's good creation. Disease was not an established part of the Divine Plan. And disease had nothing to do with Divine retribution. God is a Lover—not a monster, who would ever inflict a child with leukemia or a mother with a brain tumor. As the very agent of Creation himself, Jesus invokes and directs the power of connecting life itself to heal human existence. Expressing the will of God everywhere He went, Jesus never met a disease he did not cure. Disease, according to Jesus, was an "enemy" of God to be defeated, a sign of the fissure in creation that God is redeeming."

Pastor John Buchanan preached, "Sometimes we conclude that nobody cares about us and that we matter ultimately to no one. And into our aloneness comes one who stretches his hand across all the barriers and empty spaces to touch us and restore us and to give our lives back again. Jesus Christ is his name."

The truth is that we are all broken, hurting and excluded. We live in a cosmos where all is broken, hurting and fractured. The good news is that Jesus is coming to all of us not just to heal us, but to cleanse us.

You may feel like an ugly duckling however Jesus will reveal that you are a swan belonging to a loving community. You may be a beast, hurt, alone or cynical, but Jesus will reveal that you are royalty, for you are God's beloved child. Jesus will transform you into a beauty, who loves and is loved. You may feel helpless, trapped, dead, on display inside a glass case, but Jesus will resurrect you, perfect you, unite you with God and all in heaven with harmonious love for eternity. Surely, we will all live happily ever after. Amen.