

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
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Sermon for February 14, 2009
Lessons: II Kings 5:1-14 and Mark 1:40-45

YOU COULDN'T PROVE IT BY ME

The story is so short and seemingly routine for the gospels that we might miss its importance for people of faith right now, in our time and place. A man with a terrible disease goes to Jesus for healing. Jesus heals him, then urges him keep the matter quiet, but the man goes around telling people anyway, causing more people to seek healing from Jesus. That's it. Jesus continues walking from town to town healing sick people, proclaiming the kingdom of God, and teaching people to trust God's love for them and for the world. Stop. We need to go back to that man, that leper, so we understand what happens between him and Jesus.

"If you choose," the man tells Jesus, "you can make me clean." Do you hear the difference between that statement and, "Sir, please help me"? This man with leprosy challenges everything Jesus stands for, and that same challenge is put to us as followers of Jesus and as his church. We too contend that God loves this world and has compassion for its people. We insist that God has not gone away, is not indifferent to human distress, and will not give up on us until the world is healed and no longer works toward its own self-destruction. Standing with Jesus, we insist this gospel is true. With the leper stands a countless host of people whose reply to us is, "Oh yeah? Well, you couldn't prove it by me."

The Gospel of Mark tells us the leper moves Jesus to pity, but there is a footnote in our bibles telling us, "Other ancient authorities read *anger*" rather than pity. You see, scholars put the New Testament together from many ancient manuscripts and fragments, and those scholars make careful decisions about which source seems more reliable and which reading more valid. So, are we to picture Jesus as sympathetic here or as angry? I see him as both at once. That man with leprosy represents everyone Jesus has come to heal and make whole, and he speaks for everything Jesus is up against that calls his message and his life into question. Pity stands above and apart from the object of its sympathy. You don't want to be pitied, and neither do I. We certainly don't want to be pitiful. But Jesus does not keep himself apart from people who are suffering or from sinful people, either. So, Mark tells us Jesus reaches out his hand and touches this leper, this untouchable. There is a bond formed. Jesus does not simply heal the man but meets him as a fellow human being.

How does anger figure into this coming together of two men on a dusty road in Galilee? I cannot say for sure but can only draw from other situations in which Jesus gets

angry. What angers him? What puts a sharp edge on his message of God's love and mercy? What comes to my mind first is "hardness of heart." The gospels tell us Jesus gets angry when the good, healthy, strong, and virtuous people refuse to feel or show any compassion for those who suffer.

You see, there was a very convenient theology at work in that time. Simply put, it said that if you are suffering, you must deserve to be suffering. If you are sick, you must have done something sinful, something to displease God. If you are poor, you must be lazy or somehow wicked. If you have any reversal of fortune that plunges you into distress, well, you must deserve it because, this convenient theology insists, people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. How cute. Could there possibly be a more convenient denial of compassion than this cheap trick of insisting that life is fair and that God presides over the apportionment of wealth and poverty, health and sickness, strength and disability, beauty and ugliness, success and failure? So, it's not enough that people such as this leper must endure the disease itself that eats away their flesh; they must also bear the shame wrongly imposed upon them by the well-off who get to make the rules, who write the theology, who craft the beliefs that dismiss human suffering and deny the need for compassion.

Did I say this convenient theology was current in that time when Jesus taught in the towns of Galilee? It has never gone away, neither from human society nor from Christ's own churches. To this day, people continue to devise ways to justify dismissing the poor and suffering from consideration and even of blaming them for their own distress. Sometimes, societies go even further and blame the disadvantaged for all the troubles in the land. There is this myth of the well-off poor who "have it made" without the burden of work and worry. What an incredible lie told to justify the privilege of those who keep themselves conveniently ignorant of the realities of poverty!

The churches of Jesus Christ have many beliefs and doctrines – so many that most Christians content themselves with leaving most to the pros and selecting their own favorites to give themselves the support of a belief system that assures them life does make sense and the future is more to be welcomed than feared. We do, however, have a core belief that God indeed loves this created world and all its people. Not all Christians would agree with that statement. Some insist God loves some people but not others. Some make it seem God hates this world and care scarcely wait to destroy it. But we insist that, no, God loves the world and that's why God sent Jesus into it to redeem it from all its sin, shame, and suffering. We know the struggle is long and hard because God will not take away human freedom. God wants to be loved in response to God's own love for us, and to be able love freely and honestly, we must be left free to refuse. Our insistence that God loves all of us and all creation and that God has compassion for us forms the basis for everything else we believe, teach, and proclaim to the world.

I've done some thinking and writing this past week about a difference in terms that makes a tremendous difference in Christian faith and in our ministry as a church. Thinking through our faith and its beliefs is called theology, which literally means the "word about" or study of God and "the things of God." Theology looks at all of life in terms of God and asks the questions raised by the very naming of God. The other term we are hearing more about these days is ideology, which I suppose has a neutral meaning, but I am using its more pointed meaning that distinguishes it from faith-thinking and theology to contrast two mind-sets, two very different ways of believing in God and in Jesus Christ.

An ideology is a fixed belief system that operates without opening itself to being questioned by realities and by actual human situations. The ideologue knows in advance what is out there in the world and knows how it is all to be judged. *I have my beliefs, don't trouble me with facts.* The ideologue, therefore, chooses facts very selectively or else distorts them to cook up a reality that fits the firmly held belief system, the ideology. So, if your life situation contradicts the ideology, then you're wrong, you're bad, or you're just irrelevant – you don't exist, in effect, because you are simply removed from consideration. *Bye, bye.*

Christian faith gets challenged in two ways. One is intellectual, academic, and that way is important because it keeps us thinking and making sense of what we believe and preach. Faith affirms what cannot be proven, but it should make sense. What concerns me this morning, however, is the other challenge to our faith: the existential. This is the leper who tells Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean." This is the challenge to our insistence that God loves this world and has compassion for its people, to which the latest leper stands up and says to our faces, "You couldn't prove it by me." That's the person to whom Jesus sends us.

If our faith is just another ideology, protecting its own certainty against the real-life questions and sufferings of people, then we will respond to this latest leper by rationalizing his or her suffering. We have two ways of "justifying" what Jesus refuses to justify: we can blame the person doing the suffering, or we can either dismiss the suffering as insignificant or else rationalize it as somehow, mysteriously, for the person's own good. Both choices for safeguarding our own belief system by dismissing the leper's challenge are dishonest and unfaithful to Jesus. If we are going to stand with him, then we must accept the challenge, embracing its contradiction to our message of God's love and mercy, without giving up that message. Jesus has put us into the middle, right between the God who loves this world and its people and all the people who for quite understandable reasons tell us, "You couldn't prove it by me." We must not walk away because Jesus would not. That is the challenge for all who believe in him. If we are to be his church, this is the challenge we must meet, not with answers, but with trust in God and compassion for the leper whose real-life situation calls our trust into question. Amen.