

Stunned Silence

Mark 1:40-45

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

Stunned Silence. That's how I picture this gospel reading. Stunned Silence. A leper confronted Jesus and said to him, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." At those words I would have imagined that the crowd would have stood there with stunned silence. They all gazed at him and wanted to see what he was going to do. The skin diseased, the walking dead man, the outcast had just challenged Jesus, "If your willing, you could..." The crowds probably standing there thinking, "how rude;" "that's not right;" "Oh my goodness what an embarrassing moment;" "Jesus just keep walking;" "don't look at him, and for heaven's sake don't let him touch you". In that stunned silence, they probably thought a bunch of things, mainly because the crowds never really knew what Jesus was going to do.

Jesus was all about risks, he took them and he encouraged others to take them. If Jesus were to turn and talk to this man with leprosy then he would be taking the risk of breaking cultural and rabbinic rules at best and at worse maybe even getting the disease himself. But this story also tells us about another risk that was taken. The leper took a risk. We usually don't think about that as much, but the leper was also taking a big risk to come into Jesus' presence and asking him to heal him. Under the Mosaic law of Leviticus a person with leprosy was to not be near a city, was to stay at least ten yards, thirty feet from the clean righteous, and if seen they are to cover their bodies with cloth including even their faces, yelling out "unclean, unclean, unclean" wherever they went, so as to not bump into someone by mistake. This Leper was among the spiritual and physical untouchables, the lowest level on the social ladder. By being where he was, he was risking stern rebuke on the part of the bystanders. They could take violent action against him , even death by stoning, because they feared the disease so greatly.

He also risked disappointment. In the first century, leprosy was a persistent and incurable skin disease. The person was unsightly because of his rotting flesh, and the stench associated with it was unbearable. Once you had it, you had it for a lifetime. There was no getting rid of it. No wonder this man sought out Jesus regardless of the cost and the disappointment. Here was his only hope of being healed of this dreaded disease and being restored to health and society.

In his pleading for cleansing and restoration he was taking a major risk. He may not be healed. He may be rejected. He may be forced by the crowd to go back to his leper colony. He

may even be stoned to death. But he was willing to go to Jesus. Its not like he could hide his rotting skin, open wounds, and bleeding sores from anyone, the crowd could all tell right away that he was a leper, and outside their need of care. He was willing to risk all of this and threw himself on the mercy of Jesus. His faith is expressed in his words, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." This highlights his firm faith in Jesus. He was convinced that Jesus could restore him physically, spiritually, and socially.

But Jesus that man of risk, also takes risk and when this leper asks him, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus responds with an insane, crazy, response, he reaches out and touches the man. Now that would cause people to stand in stunned silence. Jesus did the no-nos of all no-nos. He touched the body of a unclean, a diseased person. The crowds would have been stunned, but then Jesus goes beyond that, he stretches out his hand and touches the man and then says, "I am willing. Be clean." I am sure that stunned silence then turned to horror, revulsion, or even surprise. This was still early in Jesus' ministry, remember according to Mark this is only the beginning, the people were still trying to figure out who this Jesus was. Of course we know Jesus and how he did his ministry. But in this story Jesus is risking a lot, risking getting himself in trouble, because of his love and concern for others. He knew what he was doing was risky, but he never gave it a second thought because he was so preoccupied by the cry of human need. To Jesus the great human need took precedence over everything else, he was there to heal the broken, lift up the downtrodden and give hope to those in darkness. No strict Jew, no rabbi, no would be messiah would ever venture near anyone who suffered from such a recognizable stigmata. No one in his right senses would risk health and ritual integrity by actually daring to touch the flesh of one who was regarded as so unclean and defiled as this leper. But Jesus did! He cared! Jesus said, "I am willing, Be clean!"

Listen to those words, "I am willing!" When Jesus was faced with the most dreaded disease in the first century, his intentions were to bring healing. By this reply Jesus shows us that he can and wants to in fact heal all those who are hurt and in pain, those who are lost or suffering. These words "I will" are words of grace and hope to the leper, but also to all people today, to you and I, because those words mean just as much for us today, it doesn't even matter who we are or what we are about, if we come to Jesus in faith, he is there willing and able to reach out and lift us up. Jesus lifted up the tax collector, Samaritans, Roman soldiers, woman of the streets, rich young man, Pharisees, Sadducees, governors, and sinners. This love is shown over and over again, even thought people couldn't believe it and their was those moments of stunned silence, Jesus reached out and cared for all people anyway. Just

think about those times the crowds say him encounter Matthew that tax collector, Zacchaeus another tax collector, the blind man on the road out of Jericho, The widow who had just lost her only son in death, the Roman centurion that had a sick servant. All those instances showed that Jesus cared more for the people than about all the societal rankings, the ruling power of the tax system, the racial prejudices, the economic levels and norms, the religious denominations, the hierarchy of the sexes. Never once did these man-made factors distract Jesus, yes the crowds may have been stunned in silence by what he did, but he showed his compassion by what he did in spite of the crowds.

Jesus took risks to share his compassion. This man took a risk coming to Jesus. And we can see that following Christ also implies that we take risks. When Jesus was confronted with human need, cautiousness and prudence were not his characteristic traits but compassion, concern and action were, first above everything else. For Jesus religion was a hands-on affair. This is where we as the church run into problems. We have a sort of inhibition towards getting involved, getting hands-on. Yes we believe with our minds, we have the spirit we think, but yet we regulate the hands on work to others.

Since the beginning of the church, the thought has been that where Christ is there is the church. But sometimes the church has lost touch with Christ, and gotten sidetracked. History shows us over and over that churches can easily fall into routines of traditions that protect the members, keep the order, and forget the mission. Time and time again the church has been called back to seek Christ and his compassion and to re-center itself in the love of God. Augustine challenged the church. Luther challenged the church. Bonhoeffer challenged the church. All based on the mercy of God. The mercy of forgiveness, the mercy of grace, and the mercy of caring for people in need – reminding us that is what we are to be about before anything else.

I wonder why people are so hesitant to reach up with our hands and touch those in need. Sunday after Sunday we experience the challenge of the gospel in our worship services. We are inspired by God's word and uplifted by the magnitude and splendor of our church music. But after our mountaintop experience together, we allow our hands to fall idle and fail to extend the love of God to others in concrete terms.

I heard a story about a statue of Christ in a church in Europe that was hit by a bomb during World War II. They dug up the statue and discovered that it was undamaged except for the hands that had been broken off. They hired a sculptor to replace the hands, but there was some debate as to how the hands and arms should look, do they lift up in prayer, do they fold over in reflection, are they open and extended, and they wide in welcome. Finally, they

decided to leave it like it was, with no arms and hands as a reminder to the people that Christ has called upon us to be his hands in this world. Mark tells us that "Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him." May we feel Christ's touch this day and go and do likewise. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come.
AMEN.