

“JESUS IS CONTAGIOUS”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Mark 1:40-45

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Hansen’s Disease is a condition caused by bacteria which can result in skin sores, nerve damage and muscle weakness that can worsen over time. It is not very contagious and occurs in many countries in the world in temperate, tropical and subtropical climates.

Less than 10 cases per year are diagnosed in Canada annually and about 100 in the United States, typically in the Southern states, California and Hawaii. Effective antibiotics exist and will kill the bacteria that causes the disease. If treated early enough, there is very little effect on a person’s ability to carry on a normal lifestyle. Isolating people with this disease is not necessary.

Hansen’s Disease has been around for a very long time. In biblical times it was known by another name, leprosy. For centuries leprosy was a very misunderstood disease, thought to be extremely contagious, especially through physical contact, and lepers were stigmatized and forced to live in communities called leper colonies. In 1873, a Belgian priest by the name of Josef De Veuster, volunteered to minister to lepers on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. For 16 years Josef, better known as Father Damien, worked among the lepers in the Kalaupapa leper colony on Molokai. Even though he worked tirelessly on behalf of the lepers, it wasn’t until one day, when Father Damien was soaking his feet in a hot bath and couldn’t feel the hot water; it wasn’t until he himself contracted leprosy, that a true connection was formed between the priest and the people he came to serve.

That next Sunday, instead of starting off the mass with his usual words, **“you lepers,”** Father Damien began with the words, **“we lepers.”** Word spread rapidly cross the colony and the very next Sunday, the congregation was overflowing. What changed? Even as much as Father Damien had tried, it had always been a case of **“them”** and **“him,”** the lepers, and the one who wanted to care for them. But now there was no longer any “them” and “him,” but only **“we.”** Father Damien had become one of very people he had come to help. It wasn’t until he was able to say, “we lepers,” that the one who came as an outsider became truly accepted. It was only in 1969 that the law mandating the segregation of lepers in Molokai was repealed. In October of 2009, Pope Benedict canonized Father Damien, who is now known as Saint Damien of Molokai.

According to the World Health Organization, it is now known that leprosy isn’t transmitted by physical contact or by sexual activity, but by inhaling droplets of moisture from the nose and mouth of infected patients. As little as 2 weeks of treatment can stop the transmission of the bacteria that causes leprosy. Even though leprosy has a simple and highly effective cure, there are still some countries around the world where leprosy is still feared and lepers are still treated as a marginalized and shunned people. Leprosy is not an issue that usually concerns churches in the western world. I’m pretty sure that it’s been a very long time since any of us gave any thought to leprosy, but is it not the truth that the church still regards some as lepers in our midst?

In the Greek, leprosy literally can be translated as **scaly** or **rough**. So who are the scaly and rough people in our lives that we choose to avoid, and who are the scaly

and rough people that we as the church choose to avoid? There are lots of examples, aren't there? Sometimes it's determined by economics. Someone unfamiliar walks in the church and they look out of place. You can just tell from the clothes they're wearing, ill fitting, out of style, dirty. They're poor and they look it. And you start wondering when they'll start asking for help. Maybe you wish they'd just go away, you might even be willing to pay them if they would.

Other times its politics. Some people talk about issues that just aren't polite to talk about at church. They tell you that they support the conservatives or the liberals, that they are pro-choice or pro-life, they let you know that they think that people of different sexual orientations have no place in the church, or they insist that God welcomes all people and we should celebrate the diversity of all God's creation. Some people we would rather avoid because we don't know much about their ethnicity, their race, their social background. Maybe it's the way someone dresses or the tattoos on their arms and legs, the piercings in weird places, the strange haircuts. Whatever it is, we are more than willing to partition 'them' from 'us,' whoever the 'them' happen to be.

I wonder how the church can be the body of Christ when we are so different from the one we claim to follow. The gospel according to Mark is understood to be the first of the gospel accounts. It's also the shortest and gets right into the ministry of Jesus. In Mark, there is no birth narrative, no baby Jesus. Mark starts off with John the Baptist and Jesus being baptized by him. The first chapter follows Jesus as he calls his first disciples, as he teaches and heals in and around Galilee. If you read Mark 1, you start to notice who Jesus interacts with. He gets baptized by a wild man who lives in the desert eating locusts and honey. He calls fishermen to follow him.

Pretty much your average, ordinary, run of the mill people.

Nothing special, no unique gifts, not a gifted student among them. His first healing is of a man with an unclean spirit. The townspeople probably did a pretty good job of avoiding him, but not Jesus. He drives out the unclean spirits, and with authority. Then Jesus heals Simon Peter's mother in law, and many others with diseases and demons. And today, it's a man with leprosy. You think about how desperate this man must have been. He would have known that it was just not acceptable for him to come where others were gathering. If a leper were to leave his colony and venture into a public place, he would have had to shout as he approached, **"Unclean, unclean!"** Yet he mustered up whatever courage he had and he came to Jesus and knelt before him saying, ***"If you choose, you can make me clean."***

And Jesus, moved with pity, stretched out his hand and touched him. **It's remarkable, Jesus touched the leper.** Did you know that there are 27 references to leprosy in the book of Leviticus that deal in excruciating detail about how to deal with lepers? There's not a single verse that says that the way to deal with leprosy or lepers is to touch them. But that's exactly what Jesus does. ***He breaks every law, every convention, every stereotype, he breaks through every barrier, every wall of separation, every stigma that keeps a person feeling small, and he reaches out his hand and touches the leper.***

And he said to the leper, ***"I do choose, be made clean!"***

Lepers, people with unclean spirits and demons, later on, Jesus will heal the lame, the blind, the bleeding, Gentiles, he will welcome into his company women, tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, all sorts of people that would have been

prevented for one reason or another from full inclusion into the life of the community.

Even as his society was wanting to narrow more and more who was deemed acceptable and who was deemed rough and scaly and best to be avoided, Jesus opened his ministry and his embrace to more and more people, to a wider and wider, ever expanding audience.

The man with leprosy said to Jesus, ***“If you choose, you can make me clean.”***

Jesus replied, ***“I do choose.”*** It seems that his whole ministry was a repeating of those three words.

I do choose.

I do choose to call you.

I do choose to heal you.

I do choose to love you.

I do choose to forgive you.

I do choose to redeem you.

I do choose to die for you.

I do choose – you!

No matter what it is that brings us here, whatever it is that drives us to our knees before Jesus, as we come before him with our pleas for healing, we hear his words,

I do choose, I do choose – you!

It’s funny how, when we’re so busy figuring out who doesn’t belong, Jesus is so busy making sure that no one’s left out!

After Jesus heals the leper, he tells him to go show himself to the priest so that he may be declared clean, but not to tell anyone about what had happened. **The man,**

now cured, has no intention of following Jesus' command. He went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer even go into a town, but had to stay out in the country where there was more space so that even more people, even more of the unacceptable, the outcast, the marginalized, could come to him for healing.

It makes you think, **so this is what happens when someone who was excluded is suddenly included!** When Jesus heals the leper, **he can't contain his joy.**

He tells everyone he can think of about what Jesus did for him. I think about the trouble the church is having in telling people about Jesus. Do you think that part of our problem might be that because our churches are so good at keeping those who aren't like us or acceptable to us out of our midst, **that we just don't have a lot of people who would feel the way the leper did?**

Imagine what the leper must have felt. He was an outcast, he was unclean, he was shut off from the rest of his society. He was desperate. Then comes Jesus, maybe his last hope. And he begs him to heal him. And he does, and not only does Jesus heal him, he touches him. And in that touching, in that healing, in that choosing, Jesus restores the man to his society, to his family, to his life. When your life has been so transformed, so turned upside down, why wouldn't you tell everyone you know about this Jesus, **how could you not!**

When's the last time we felt that sort of urgency and joy about Jesus? **You know, Jesus is contagious. The love he has for people is contagious. But in order for us to pass on that love, we have to be infected with it first.** We catch what Jesus has when we become a church, when we become people who welcome those Jesus

welcomed, who understand that it can't be about ***“us”*** and ***“them,”*** but it has to be about ***“we.”***

It wasn't until Father Damien was able to say “we lepers” that his ministry was fully accepted by the lepers in Molokai. Imagine if we were to be a church that was able to say, “we lepers.” Everyone has something that keeps us from being the people Jesus wants us to be. Everyone has some condition that would force us to shout out, “unclean, unclean,” if we were to dare approach the holy God in our midst. If we understood that all of us fall short, that all of us are scaly and rough at times, we might learn more and more of the humility required to identify with all God's people, no matter what they look like, what they believe, where they come from, how much they've got, whatever it might be. And if the church becomes a place where everyone is welcome and where we identify with all people, where all are welcome, imagine how many people might find the healing and inclusion that the man with leprosy found those many years ago. **And when those who are excluded are suddenly included, their joy won't be contained.** They will tell everyone they can think of about this Jesus who welcomes them, loves them, accepts them, heals them, and they'll tell them about the church that included them and helped them to get to know this Jesus. **And what would that do for the health of our churches everywhere!**

There's a saying that has been attributed to many different people which goes like this:

A society will be judged by how it treats its weakest members. And I think that it would be the same for a church. ***A church will be judged, not for how it treats those who they think are acceptable or esteemed, but by how it treats those who***

they feel are scaly and rough. And isn't it the same for us in our individual lives as well? Who are those lepers for us, who do we do our best to avoid? Let's not fool ourselves; those we avoid know that they are being avoided. If you've ever been on the other side, been shunned by others for whatever reason, you know what that particular pain feels like. What kind of witness do we bear as followers of Jesus? when our lives exhibit such an easy tendency to separate the welcome and the unwelcome? If a church will be judged for how it treats the scaly and the rough, won't we be held to that same standard? It kind of sounds a little like Jesus separating the sheep from the goats on the Day of Judgment, saying that the dividing line between those who really are in and those who are out, will be how we responded to those who are the least of Christ's sisters or brothers.

The good news is that Jesus is contagious...we can catch what Jesus has; we can be infected with the love Jesus has for all people. We're all lepers in some fashion or another. The good news is that we have a Saviour whose response to our need is to say to us, ***I do choose. I do choose you.***

He could have chosen only the respectable, only the faithful, only the acceptable, but he chose all of us, with all our roughness and scaly-ness. It's good news.

We are included and we need to be a church that follows the example of our master. **Jesus is contagious, we need to catch what he has, we need to be infected with his love, his compassion, his mercy, his kindness, his choosing.**

May it be so for us and for his church.

Thanks be to God!

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