

## **Will you reach out your hand?**

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We pick up today with another story about healing in the Gospel of Mark. Last week I commented that there are more verses, about 200, about healing in Mark than there are verses about the passion.

Jesus is probably traveling on the road somewhere in Galilee. We can assume that he is not in a town because in Jesus' time a leper would not have been allowed within the limits of a town. The leper would be considered unclean and anyone coming in contact with him is unclean. Lepers would stand away from the road, be covered head to toe and yell unclean to all who pass by. This leper however approaches Jesus, falls at his feet and acknowledges Jesus' power by saying, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus is moved with pity and touches the man. Immediately (Mark's favorite word in the gospel) he is made clean. He then tells the man to show himself to a priest. This step was required because only a priest could declare the man clean and allow him to return to his home and his community.

We are only at the end of the first chapter of Mark and already we have three healings of the three major illnesses of the day. The first is the demonic possession with the man in the synagogue. Peter's mother in law is healed of a fever, which often was considered caused by evil spirits and finally a leper who by Levitical law is cast out of and cut off from his community. All this happens in just 45 verses. As a set of healings this tells us a great deal about Jesus.

In the case of Jesus healing the leper, we may not have a concept of what is involved in this act. The Rt. Rev. Mark Dyer retired bishop of Bethlehem Pennsylvania and theology professor at Virginia Seminary often told a story about his experience with lepers. Prior to becoming an Episcopal priest Bishop Dyer was a Roman Catholic priest. He spent several years in India teaching theology to the nuns of Mother Theresa's convent.

One day he was walking through the streets with one of the sisters and a leper approached him just like in this story. She knelt in front of him and asked him to lay hands on her and pray for her. Mark looked at the badly disfigured face and then looked at the sister next to him. He said, "What should I do?" The sister smiled and said, "What would Jesus expect you to do." "Pray for her," he answered. The sister simply looked at him and then at the woman.

So he reached down, laid his hands on her head and prayed for her to be healed. He said that he never realized until that moment just how radical Jesus was. Leprosy was a dreaded disease and one that was seen as a curse from God. We know now that this is a disease that can be cured, but the poor woman in India had no money for any sort of treatment. Her

only hope was in prayer. I suspect many of you shuddered at the thought, I certainly did when he told the story. Yet that is the example Jesus gives us.

Mother Theresa's ministry in India was and continues today to be a ministry to the last and least. She truly embodied Jesus' words, what you do for the least of these you do for me.

Yes, like with the story of Elisha and Naaman, these healing stories all have to do with showing the power that Jesus had to heal, but they also teach us about to whom Jesus ministered. That is the model that we see in the Gospel of Mark. Mark continually places Jesus in the role of savior of those in the most need of his help. This is the model that Sister Theresa also adopted.

The nun in India asked Bishop Dyer the key question. What would Jesus ask or expect you to do?" This is different from the now rather trite WWJD, what would Jesus do. We are not Jesus and cannot do what he did, but we can step back and look at our broken world and ask, what would Jesus expect us to do in a given situation.

Both of these stories are focused on caring for people that are often forgotten. There are many in today's world who are forgotten, invisible, known only to God. Jesus asks us to remember them. Remember is an interesting word that means to put back together, to make whole. Jesus calls us to help make these people whole, no matter why they are in the situation they are in.

What would Jesus have us do is what is behind the REACH work camp that our youth attend each summer and they are making plans for their third trip. A dozen youth and four adults are getting ready and they need your help. Here to tell you a little about the trip is Peter Dempsey.

Peter Dempsey

"Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him." Last summer, myself and 13 other kids along with 4 adults traveled to Peterstown, West Virginia on what was for me my first Mission Trip. I really did not know what to expect. Where were we going, why were we going, and how long is it going to take to get there? I really nervous not knowing what to expect and who I would meet. On the night that we arrived at the High School, we had our first program where we met our "work-groups" and had a chance to see what we would be working on later that week. The first thing that I had noticed once program started is that my work group did not consist of anyone that I knew and I became nervous once again. The program staff implemented the use of "neighbor" for the people that we would be helping throughout the week. My group was assigned a farm that needed lots and lots of paint. Our neighbor was an older gentlemen who could no longer keep up his farm because he had been stricken with cancer. He then took in a young man and told him that he could live there if he did the farm work for him. Needless to say that the young man did everything but the most unpopular of jobs-painting.

As the week went on, my definition of work group evolved into close friends and neighbor evolved into a person with a story, not just a stranger in need of help. Our days started with a wake-up at 6:30 and as a teenager, that is crossing paths with school. This is my summer vacation, what am I doing getting up at 6:30 in the morning? That is one of the few cons. After breakfast and morning program, we were off to our neighbors' for a day of hard-work and sweat. However, we did have a lunch break. Our neighbor even joined us later in the week. One of the better experiences of the week was during lunchtime prayer when I got to learn more and more about the people that I had just met. As I said earlier, my definition of work group evolved into close friends and that is exactly what happened. We arrived at Reach Work Camp on Sunday. On Monday, lunch prayer was dull and straight-forward whereas Friday's lunch prayer was filled with emotion, challenges, and feelings.

Around 4, we all returned to the High School and had a little bit of free time before Dinner and Evening Program. For those who know me quite well, you could make a good guess to say that most of my free time was spent with my very good friend Andrew Miller. There were hundreds of other kids from a variety of states who attended. Relationships were made quickly upon the first day because people were genuine, non-judgmental and came with a common goal in mind. We all traveled, no matter how long it took us to get there to spread god's word and help others for the sake of their benefit, not our own.

As a result of attending this Mission Trip in the summer of 2011 to Peterstown, West Virginia, I have a better understanding of what it means to help others and serve the community. Helping these people, is not just about their material gain, in this case a newly painted barn and greenhouse. It is about reassuring them that someone cares about their well-being and is able to take action upon that. Honestly, as soon as I arrived back home, the house that I had walked into casually thousands of times before became a beautifully painted and structured house. I felt very fortunate to have these luxuries such as running water and a steady income. I also felt remorse as I recalled my greed before embarking on the trip. Personally, the most important aspect of this trip is helping others obviously, however when you help someone, you either consciously or unconsciously grow and become a better person because of your experience. Now, I'm not saying that I am smarter and get straight As after going on the mission trip, but being greedy is certainly not a characteristic anyone wants to be identified with. This experience was definitely a humbling one, and I am very thankful for it. Until about a month ago, I did not want to go back at all. I recalled how tired I was and how dreadful it was to wake up at 6:30 in the morning during the summer time. However, I began to think deeper and deeper about my experience and what it really meant. And that is why I have decided to return. To help more neighbors, make more relationships with my peers, build some muscle, and ultimately reinforce my christian faith.

"Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him" I will reach my hand out once again, won't you do the same?