

Ron Gilmer  
6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Year B  
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## **LEPERS, HEALTH CARE AND THE STATE OF ALABAMA**

### **MARK 1:40-45**

Attribute it to providence or something else: the fact that the lectionary gives us a leper story on the Sunday after Alabama Arise's bi-annual conference at Birmingham Southern feels like something more than a coincidence. Attribute it to providence or something else: the fact that Jesus is embracing a leper in Mark's Gospel the Sunday before the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley signs on to---or rejects---the General Assembly's recommendation regarding changes in ordination standards feels like something bigger than the PC(USA) is at work among us. Attribute it providence or something else: the fact that I wore a South Carolina Gamecock shirt to yesterday's basketball game after spending the week reflecting on what it would be like to have leprosy reminds me that God has a sense of humor. God has a sense of humor even when the church, the world and Crimson Tide fans do not!

Thanks to Gillie Presley and Ruthie Sherrill for encouraging me, for encouraging us, to be involved in Alabama Arise. If you have forgotten the group's mission (or perhaps never knew it), Alabama Arise describes itself as "a coalition of religious, community and civic groups that promotes state policies to improve the lives of low-income people." Granted, that phrase "low-income people" is enough to cause some of us to stumble, and yet the emphasis on justice---social and economic justice---is deeply appreciated. It is consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and for at least part of Christ's body, it is its essence.

Between this event and the series of workshops in which I participated at presbytery's Main Event back in August, I feel like know almost as much about as Alabama's political landscape as any

state's that I have called home (because the presentations are so well organized, intelligent and behind-the-scenes). For example, one of the facts that I learned at the Alabama Arise conference that I have been quoting constantly since then is that Alabama's governor effectively has no veto power, because any gubernatorial veto may be overturned by a simple majority; of course, a bill would not make it to the governor's desk in the first place without a simple majority!

One of the best line's of the conference belonged to Gillie. When I asked her about the governor's inability to veto legislation, Gillie said, "Ron, you don't know some of the governors that we've had. It hasn't always been a bad thing!" Still, I am not so sure that our checks always check and our balances always balance here in the self-proclaimed "Heart of Dixie."

The story in Mark's Gospel begins with a leper coming to Jesus, kneeling before him and saying, "I am not eligible for decent health care." No, he does not say this, but it is not difficult to imagine him doing so. Feeling as if he has no choice, the leper cries out to Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean." If *you* choose, because, I am obviously incapable of improving my situation without some help...

In *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologists Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge argue that the early church would not have survived---much less thrived---without its emphasis on health care, without exercising compassion toward the poor, the widowed and the orphaned. For example, if lepers had access to affordable health care, then they may not have arrived at a place in which they could cry out to Jesus, "...make me clean."

Be careful, however, about pushing this line of thinking too far. It is susceptible to being co-opted by the same part of Christ's body who does not strive for social justice, because Jesus said that the poor would always be with us. If everybody had access to quality health care, we would not witness healing by faith and faith alone.

Plus, there is the pity factor. In this story, Jesus is moved to pity; and this is fine, because Jesus is the one being moved, but pity seems to assume a difference in value that is capable of disrupting the

rhythm of our life together. As the Son of God, Jesus' humanity trumps everybody else's, but notice what Jesus does with the power that the leper gives to him: he gives it back. Jesus stretches out his hand and says to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" He does not heal him just enough to flaunt power over him. He does not give him just enough to survive but not enough to thrive. No, Jesus does more than empower and encourage. He heals this person and sends him on his way.

I prefer to think of this person as a person as opposed to reducing him to a disease. By the end of the story, the person is not a leper, and there was more to him than being a leper back when he was sick. One of the problems with being labeled a leper is related to the lack of clarity between sickness and demon-possession on the one hand and healing and cleansing on the other. Granted, a cleaning is not necessarily an exorcism, but it does suggest dirt; and what does Jesus do after he has the dirt on this person? He lets go of it, and after sternly warning him, sends him away at once saying, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to presbytery (I mean the priest), and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

Say nothing to no one. This is not going to speed the political or ecclesial process, and there is no shortage of interpretations of this saying of Jesus. Does Jesus ask (or tell?) this person he has healed to be quiet because of messianic timing or extravagant humility? Maybe...for me, it has more to do with the way in which Mark tells a story. Remember: everything happens immediately in Mark. Saying nothing to no one heightens the sense of urgency. If this person whom Jesus has healed stops at the coffee shop for a bagel and conversation, he may not ever make it to the temple where Christ commands him to go.

If Jesus healed a man or woman in Alabama, it would not significantly impact the state budget, because the percentage of the budget that is earmarked for public health care is relatively low, which is bad news, because the tax structure in this state is enough to make anyone sick. The wealthiest 1% is taxed 4.3% while the poorest 20% is taxed 11.2%. No, I do not know much about economics, but I can

say “regressive.” I do not know much about grocery taxes, but I know that if this state sought other forms of revenues (like all of the others, except Mississippi), those who are hungry are more likely to be fed; and since those who are starving are more likely to get sick, suddenly grocery tax reform feels like preventative medicine. Montgomery, we have a problem. Do you choose to be made clean?

The person whom Jesus heals is disobedient, and God uses him. Jesus says, “Say nothing to anyone,” and Mark reports that he goes out and begins proclaiming it freely, spreading the word (and not leprosy), so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly.” Maybe Jesus says “Say nothing to anyone,” because he is not prepared to defend the extraordinary claim that leprosy dissolves in the palms of his hands.

The thought of a leper being used by God to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ is outrageous, but please be careful stepping into the leper’s shoes in this story before marching to presbytery on Thursday. The person in this story does not describe himself as a leper. Mark does. Jesus does not reduce this person to leprosy. Mark does. All Jesus has to say on the subject is, “Be made clean,” and that is all Jesus says to any of us, “Repent and be baptized...be made clean.”

Why should the PC(USA) baptize gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and queer Presbyterians? Because God created all the children of the world: into Christ’s body, the church is baptized---no DNA tests required. Being gay or straight, lesbian or transgendered, is not a disease; it is a gift that may feel like a weight from time to time, but it is a weight only because there are so many people out there who frame it as a disease. To them, Christ says, “Repent and be baptized...be made clean.”

Rather than be framed by ignorance, let us be liberated by truth, truth that Christ calls us to proclaim when he heals a person who is afflicted by leprosy, a person whom Mark fails to name. Jesus cleans. Jesus heals. Jesus equips us to proclaim the Gospel. When one does so effectively, and the church notices, that person is ordained. Often this happens later than it should, but one of the patterns in church history that I have noticed is that the body eventually catches up with its head. This is the

Gospel of Jesus Christ: Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and by his grace, the church and the world are reconciled to God through faith in the one who was and is and is to come. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.