



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

April 24, 2016

"A Healing Touch" (Encounters with Jesus Series)-Mark 1:40-45

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This week is kind of special for me because it marks one year as a pastor here at First Prez. When I first came to First Prez a number of years ago as a visiting teacher I was immediately impacted by the Compassion wall. As a former missionary who lived and worked among some of the poorest of the poor, that wall spoke a lot to me about the heart and passion of this community.

Recently, the president of Compassion told us that we are the only church that sponsors more kids than it has church members in the congregation. This is truly incredible! I am so proud to be part of such a Christian community that makes reaching out to the hurting of our world such a priority.

The gospel story we are looking at today has many things in common with the children we sponsor. In fact, in some ways he had it a lot worse!

Over the past few months we have been looking at different snapshots of people's encounters with Jesus. We continue that theme with this story between Jesus and a person with leprosy. And through this encounter we will see one of the chief characteristics that always seemed to be at the core of who Jesus was and permeated all He did, and that was the quality and character of Compassion.

This encounter takes place early on in Jesus' ministry as He is beginning to become known around the countryside. His reputation as a great teacher and healer is spreading like wildfire. People are finding healing like they never thought possible.

One day as Jesus was traveling in Galilee (northern Israel), a man with leprosy came up to Him. Remember what it says in Mark 1:40 - *A man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."*

How many of you have ever been to or visited a leprosy ward in a hospital or seen people with what we now call, Hansen's disease?

I'll never forget my first exposure to people with leprosy. I was 25 years old and working as a missionary in Asia; I was in Nepal at the time. I had already seen some pretty rough stuff by this point in this and other Asian countries. Because I worked in a refugee camp I saw things like malnutrition, amputees from war, disfigurement due to disease or land mines, etc. But for some reason this was tougher.

One day as I visited a mission hospital far into the Himalayas a doctor asked me, "Steve, can I show you around the hospital?"

I immediately said yes. After going around a bit he again asked, "Would you like to see our leprosy ward?" At first I paused, but after a moment I found myself agreeing to take a look.

So there I went into the "Leper Ward"—a dark, dingy, damp long hallway of suffering. There I saw people wrapped in rags huddled with some of their other friends who had this disease and/or relatives glancing up at me with all their sadness and anguish. Because I was wearing a white coat like a doctor, they thought I was one. In those moments I felt like such a fraud. I knew couldn't heal them. I could barely look at them!

Now just so you understand a little bit of what I saw let me show you just a few pictures of what Hansen's disease can look like. Note the disfiguration—the stubby fingers and hands. Here's another picture. I don't mean to gratuitously shock you, but it helps to understand this man's life. It also helps you understand what I saw and what Jesus was looking at in our story.

Seeing things like this, I bumped my way along that long hallway trying hard to not let their deformities get to me. However, by the time I left the ward and went outside I was stunned. My heart was filled with emotions. My breathing was rapid and shallow.

Fear, sorrow, anguish, and a sense of utter powerlessness, flooded my soul.

For a guy who was sent to preach to the poor, to help turn ashes into beauty, and despair into praise, I wasn't doing too good of a job. Thankfully, Jesus did a way better job than me.

This leads me back to our gospel story. One of the first questions to ask of this story is why tell this story in the way it is told? Why not skim it with a simple summary, "And Jesus went about healing lepers?" Why add a few details to this story?

I think it is because the writer wants us to catch something deeper. Historically, in the ancient world, there was no greater dreaded disease than leprosy. One's body would slowly deteriorate; noses, fingers, toes, etc. would fall off from rot or infection (like that picture).

Understandably, lepers were often met with great fear and rejection. Many times they were not welcomed in cities. In fact, a person with the disease had to walk around stating they were unclean, out loud, when coming near people.

Imagine what that was like. Imagine coming to church today and having to announce you've had some illness (Herpes, AIDS, depression, etc.). And then imagine in response to that announcement no one ever touching you, no one ever embracing you, or no one ever befriending you because of that illness.

What would it be like to go through life every day in this reality? How does this man feel? What is his life like spiritually, economically, and socially? Since leprosy was regarded as defilement

in their eyes it made a person ritually unacceptable. This meant excommunication from normal social and religious life.

Imagine the emotional and psychological effect such rejection had on him. This reminds me of a study done to find the connection between obese women and depression because they noticed a higher rate of depression among such women. Originally scientists thought that the depression was directly related to the obesity in some way. But in fact, they found the depression was from the *response of others* to their obesity. In other words, they felt the sting of rejection.

Our response to God-created, God-loved people that might be physically, emotionally, and morally flawed has direct and deep psychological impact. And if we cannot handle brokenness in others in *all* its forms, we could end up hurting, or at least stunting the very mission Jesus has us on. Notice how the man comes to Jesus. Mark records that ⁴⁰ *A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."*

Have you ever begged? Do you know what it is like to beg? I want you to close your eyes for a minute and imagine this scene with you there. What do you picture as you see this man begging? Now look into his eyes, what do you see there?

Have you seen that in another? Have you ever looked deep into the eyes of the desperate? Have you ever tried *not* to see the eyes of the desperate?

I remember in my early days in Thailand a similar incident happened to me. I was on the

streets of Bangkok waiting for my computer to be fixed and killing time. Then from a distance I saw what looked like a young boy about 12 or 13 staring at me. I didn't pay much attention at first, but he looked at me and all I could see was his one eye. When he saw me he started to quickly move toward me. As he got closer I noticed he had to hobble along. Then I began to see what his face truly looked like. It was the most disfigured thing I had ever seen.

In all my time among the poor I never saw this and it startled me. I tried to nonchalantly move away, but he kept coming. When he reached me I could not bear to look at him. My knees actually buckled from the sight of him.

He looked at me with such expectation I couldn't handle it. So I reached in my pocket and gave him whatever Thai money I had in there, and then, I, Mr. Missionary to the poor and needy quickly moved on.

My response to the boy reminds me of some stinging words spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once wrote. He spoke about how sometimes our "Charitable acts of Pity" are done for less than noble reasons.

Listen to what he said. "I often act with pity. I give some money to a beggar on the streets of Toronto or New York, but I do not look him in his eyes, sit down with him, or talk with him. I am too busy to really pay attention to the man who reaches out to me. My money replaces my personal attention and gives me an excuse to walk on."

He also says our minimal gestures of pity can be unconscious substitutions for real friendship and community with the hurting.

In other words, it is easier to give money or an expensive gift to another than to truly give our personal attention.

And this was exactly what *I* was doing by “throwing money” at that boy. Yes, he needed money, but not in the way I gave it. And not for the reasons I gave it. What he needed just as much, or even more, was someone who could be a friend and embrace him as he is and give their attention to him.

Let me contrast that with a story about my wife. Many years ago, when we first came back here from seminary we lived in a very tiny apartment in lower Pearl City. Each day my wife would take my infant daughter out for a walk in the stroller.

As she did this, she would stop and sit and talk with a homeless woman who lived across the street from us. Time and again my wife Dyne and Helen would simply spend time talking story and they developed a great relationship.

Then one day when I came home from work walked into my apartment and saw Helen sitting their in my kitchen grinning at me with her black and gray teeth. We talked for a while and then Helen went on her way.

After Helen left I told my wife, “Dyne, it’s good to help these people, but invite them into our home?!” I then went throughout the apartment sterilizing everything with Lysol. My wife looked at me like I was crazy.

Eventually and thankfully, Dyne taught me how to embrace Helen and not fear her. We had Helen over several times. We even had her over for Thanksgiving at our house.

My point is, Dyne did not simply see a pitiful person needing a handout. When she looked at Helen she saw a potential friend and, therefore, sought to create a relationship and a sense of community with her. That’s what compassion is all about.

Let’s read Jesus’ response of compassion to the man in the next section again.

1:41-42 - ⁴¹ *Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!”* ⁴² *Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.*

Notice how when Jesus meets a man in a horrible condition he is “filled with compassion.” In the original language of the New Testament (Greek), the word compassion is literally—“guts”. In other words, Jesus felt a pang in his gut for the man. He was deeply moved by this man.

In English the word “Compassion” is a Latin compound word that literally means, “to suffer with.” And this is at the heart of compassion: to feel the suffering of another person and then *do* something about it.

Also notice something vitally important here: when and how this man is healed. When I teach classes on this passage I ask the folks, “When and how was this man healed?” Most invariable say the man was healed when Jesus *touched* him. But that is incorrect.

Notice the order of the healing: The man asks for help, Jesus feels compassion, Jesus reaches out and touches the man, and then commands the man to be healed, and *only then* the man is healed.

It’s very important that we note that the healing comes at the command and *not at the touch*. So what was going on with the touch? And is it significant?

Remember, Jesus could have just cured this man with a word and then left. He could have healed this guy from across the street. But instead, He chooses to extend His hand *first* to touch the leper *before* any healing takes place.

You may be thinking, “Hey, Steve I thought your sermon title was, A Healing Touch? Isn’t this what you were talking about?” Actually, no it isn’t. It’s not the disease that Jesus’ touch heals in this case. The touch is *not* the means to heal disease, but to heal this man’s soul.

Physical healing comes at Jesus’ command, but restoration of soul and the re-humanizing of this man’s life come at Jesus’ touch.

Can you imagine how he felt? It was probably the first time in years that someone touched him in love!! That’s why I really like this artistic portrayal of this encounter. You can see Jesus looking at this man in the eyes as He has His hand around this man’s neck. You can see He is “humanizing” this man even *before* the man is healed.

Think about it, if Jesus healed him and then touched him it would have perpetuated the idea that a leper was still untouchable. So something huge is established by the order of His miracle and I think Mark does this on purpose because he wants us to get something here.

Also, it is important to notice that Christ is healing the man in more ways than one.

Yes, Jesus is healing the man's body and healing his soul, but Jesus is also healing his lack of community.

This is why Jesus orders the man to go to the priests (v. 44). You see, back in that day when the priests would announce that he was indeed clean, the man would be brought back into community.

Why is that important? Well, for one reason in a peasant culture, being a communal member wasn't just a nice, warm fuzzy thing to experience. It was vital for survival economically, socially, etc.

I saw this in Thailand. Rice farmers from various farms would help each other with the planting and harvesting of rice. Why? Because this communal approach increased crop output, which brought greater financial stability.

In addition, it lessened the work that was extremely tiresome and laborious—especially for those who might be weak, ill, aged, handicapped, etc.

So for Jesus, the healing is not complete until this man is healed communally. As someone once wrote, "Salvation is not only heaven, but its experiencing heaven through each other."

If we don't experience "heaven" and salvation through each other, people can end up continuing in needless suffering even though they know the Lord Jesus Christ.

Too often I have seen Christians continue to experience much shame and rejection because the people of God could not also become the *embrace* of God.

You see, the reality is that even though we may know Jesus, we

often hide our fears, loneliness, deep hurts, regretful actions, and our shame. But these are the very things Jesus wants to touch. He wants to love us there in our perceived "deformity" not hide them from Him.

The strange thing is even in church people still hide. Why?

When I was on the mainland more than a few people told me that they have to hide or whisper about their struggle with depression and anxiety or their need to take medication for these things. Why? Well, some told me it was because in their church it showed a lack of faith. Moreover, some said that they have to get counseling in another town so no one from church will know!! Why in the world does this happen among Christians?

I think things like this happen, in part, because we are not sure others will meet our so-called "ugliness" with a loving embrace. Thus, we remain in our silent suffering.

This is one reason why I am a very big fan of small groups. Small groups become the one place we can take off all our leper-wrappings and sit together as we really are. When we do this we can *continue* to feel the healing touch of Christ on the very things which makes us feel most unwanted, shamed, scared, and sick.

Brothers and sisters, should not the church be *the* place to reveal your "deformities" to others? This is what people do with me in counseling. It is such a sacred and holy moment when people share with me their "deformities" within. And by the same token, it is sacrilege to meet

them with disinterest or Christian clichés.

I remember when I was a missionary in Thailand my dad passed away. I was not going to be able to make it back for the funeral. I was deeply saddened. The missionaries whom I had just met didn't know what to say to me. In fact, some seemed to avoid me. One day one missionary ran into me and simply said, "Why do you look so glum? Don't you know, God's in control?" I thought to myself, "Are you serious? Is that the best you can come up with—a theological cliché?" Needless to say, that did not help much.

Very often we don't know what to say or do with someone's pain because we have not walked well with our own.

So why talk about a story of a leper to people who are not lepers? Because the story of the leper is a story of a person who is broken inside and out.

I teach this because the only person you will ever sit next to in church is a broken one. The only family, community, or nation you will be in is a broken one. And if there is one thing that is common among the people I counsel is that they fear they are "*rejectable*" simply because of their brokenness.

And this is why compassion is so vital to life, because it is such a powerful source of deep healing to the deepest parts of our lives.

Folks, you may never be able to heal a "leper," but you can sure touch one, and when you do the kingdom of God comes through you on earth as it is in heaven. Don't ever underestimate a compassionate touch.

We may not be able to prevent all the pain that happens to another, but when we respond with the compassion of Christ through our genuine interest in someone's pain or through our deep soulful listening, we become part of God's process to transform that pain. Compassion keeps the trauma of life from becoming too overwhelming. Compassion can bring vital hope into a tragic picture. And that is no small ministry!

A number of years ago I used to go to a park and help out with the homeless. I met one homeless man there. His name is Wren. When I first met him it was hard to carry on a conversation. He would start the conversation okay, but then move quickly on to Martians, then to the running around of giant cockroaches, then trees walking in deserts, etc. You see, Wren was schizophrenic.

Nonetheless, each time I was there I would talk as long as I could. I would also be sure to shake his hand and hug him.

About eight years after I stopped going to the park I saw Wren in a store parking lot. He saw me and immediately came over smiled and said, "Hey Pastor Steve!" I was amazed he remembered me. We shook hands and hugged just like we always did. We talked for a while and then we would shake hands and hug again.

I couldn't heal his schizophrenia, but I could sure hug him. And of all the things that could not register in his mind, the love I showed toward him did; that I would be a guy whom he could run up to, shake a hand, and give a hug him. A lot of different folks went to that park to help feed Wren, but few would touch him.

Let me simply say this, to give your money, clothes, and food to those in need is important and I want to encourage you to continue such things. But to truly listen to the hurting, to know their name and hear their story, is vitally important. It's being an answer to the Lord's Prayer where it says, "*Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*"

At the last church I pastored I gave our small groups \$500 to use as they saw fit to minister to others in Jesus' name. However, I gave this money with this standard: you couldn't just give to an organization. Whoever you gave the money to, or bought something for with the money, you had to know their name and know their story. I wanted to create a standard of personal engagement.

This led to people talking to and ministering to people they would have never done on their own. In fact, what this personal engagement did was to cause some groups to start ministries that kept going for months—some even years—all because they took a personal interest in the pain-filled and hurting people of our community. The people to whom they ministered were not "pity projects," but real people, with real stories, with real hopes, dreams, scars, and fears.

This is why we always encourage letter writing to your kids that you sponsor through Compassion international. That personal interaction makes a world of difference for both sides!

This is also why I'm so encouraged by what we are doing in Waimanalo with Laundry Love and building that home for a family there. This is exactly the kind of thing Jesus modeled and

commissioned for us to do in this world.

I also love it when I get emails that share about yet another venture into a home for the elderly. It's great to hear how you all share the love, attention, and blessings of Jesus to those that many folks overlook. When I see emails like that I always give a "Thank You Jesus" because I'm a part of a community that has such things as a central focus of our lives.

Your acts of *compassionate touches* may not be huge, earth altering events, but as Tony Campolo likes to say when he encourages crowds to sponsor a child: "One person may not be able to change the whole world, but we *can change* the whole world for one person." And that begins with us being people who, like Christ, offer a Healing Touch.

Christian spiritual writer Larry Crabb sums it up well when he writes, "A spiritual community, a church, is full of broken people who...journey together with their wounds and worries and washouts visible, but are able to see beyond the brokenness to something alive and good, something whole.

"A central task of community is to create a place that is safe enough for the walls to be torn down, safe enough for each of us to own and reveal our brokenness...only then can community be used of God to restore our souls..."

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Note: Sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com