

**Mark 1:40-45 “Shunned...and Restored”**

The crowd parts to let the rough and scaly man through.  
They know by his appearance and by smelling him  
that he is a *persona non grata* –  
an outcast nobody dares get close to.  
His has been a lonely life,  
an ugly skin condition isolating him from polite society.  
But today, the man kneels at the feet of the healer who just rolled into  
town...  
and when he gets up, he is shining –  
his skin as dewy as a newborn baby’s.  
Now everybody wants to touch him,  
to get a piece of the miracle.  
Jesus’ touch has restored not only his complexion, but his social life.  
After perhaps years of a zombie-like existence, living on the margins,  
the man finally feels human again.  
He can go home.

The condition that had made the man in Mark’s story a social pariah  
was not Hansen’s disease,  
or leprosy as we know it today, which still afflicts millions  
in places like Tanzania, Burma, Brazil, and India.  
Hansen’s disease was unknown in Palestine  
at the time our scriptures were written.  
The word “leprosy” was used by biblical writers  
to mean any one of many skin conditions,  
including psoriasis, eczema, ringworm, and lupus.  
Some scholars think that the man in this narrative (like Naaman in the  
Old Testament) may have had vitiligo (vittle-LIE-go) –  
the condition that Michael Jackson suffered from  
which causes the skin to lose pigment.



Whatever diagnosis doctors might make today, the man's neighbors believed that the lesions or white patches on his body were evidence of some immoral behavior. That sin made him religiously unclean, and thus unwelcome any place there were people. There was concern, too, about contagion – spreading the disease to others.



So he was barred from homes, the market, the village well, even the synagogue for the worship and the potlucks he loved. The priests had drilled it into the people that touching him or anything that belonged to him would make *them* ritually unclean, too – if not also sick.

So, for the protection of the community, those with certain symptoms were sent away –shunned, isolated. Only when they were symptom-free and officially declared clean again by the priests, could they return to their families and re-enter society.

Cut off and excluded for who knows how long, the man who encountered Jesus that day was thrilled to be restored – not only to physical health but to social wholeness, too.

So it's all good for the guy who meets Jesus that day.

He get to trade in the L on his forehead for a W.

But what does his story have to do with any of us?  
For surely it does.

As one of my seminary professors used to say,  
the stories in the NT are “not told only for themselves...  
they are not only about other people...  
they are always about us.”<sup>1</sup>

Maybe you’ve walked for a day or two in the sandals of the man Jesus  
healed that day.

Have you been quarantined because of illness?

Stayed at home -- or wanted to -- with a cold sore?

Endured the comments of peers when you got your braces or glasses or a  
bad acne breakout?

Or maybe you’ve known someone living with HIV/AIDS

and witnessed the fear and prejudice they sometimes run up against,  
especially in the early years of the epidemic.



Or maybe you or someone you care about has been bullied – taunted  
because of what they are interested in or what they look like or who they  
love?

Kids can be so cruel, grownups often say.

But kids are not the only ones who can be insensitive, uncaring, fearful.

Maybe you can relate to the people in the crowd

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<sup>1</sup> James Boyce, *Word & World: Mark*, Winter 2006, 30.

who followed the rules  
and kept a safe distance from the rough and scaly man...  
who even laughed nervously at his predicament.

And what of the healer, Jesus?

Can you identify with *him* in this story?

There's quite a lot about his experience of the encounter with the rough and scaly man packed in verse 41.

On the face of it, the NRSV translation seems clear enough:

Jesus is moved by pity, *compassion* for the poor fellow slouching before him.

But as a good study Bible will tell you,

not all the ancient scrolls contain the same word translated here as "pity":

"Moved by *pity*, Jesus stretched out his hand..."

Other ancient authorities (i.e. scrolls),

the footnote will tell you, read "anger":

"Moved by *anger*, Jesus stretched out his hand..."

That makes some sense if you look at verse 43, too:

"After sternly warning him Jesus sent him away at once..."

It's hard to see in English, but the language Mark uses is very strong.

Jesus is actually snorting here, fuming, even.

He's *one mad dude*.

By his words and actions,

we understand that Jesus feels compassion for the man.

AND he is infuriated, the text suggests.

Why, do you think?

Could he be angry with the society that marginalized him, the bullies...?

It's a good balance to keep for those of us who try to follow Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Can we do it?

Can we be like him?

- Prophetically angry at the human-made structural injustice that crushes people, ethnic groups, classes, whole nations...
- AND, open-hearted enough to feel compassion for those who suffer?<sup>2</sup>

**IF YOU'RE NOT  
OUTRAGED  
YOU'RE NOT PAYING  
ATTENTION**

Infuriated. I get that.

I get mad when children die of hunger and thirst and preventable diseases...

when government gridlock halts progress...

when some people can't get the health care that others can...

when lending institutions seem to hold all the cards for so many families...

when bullies of any kind prey on the vulnerable.

There's a lot to feel angry about.

There are a lot of people hurting right now.

While he walked this earth,

Jesus was all about standing up to oppression and injustice.

And his righteous anger burns white-hot now, too.

Because so many of the people Jesus loves – and that's everybody... too many of them are suffering.

Because this world isn't filled with heaven yet.

And that's because a few of us have way more than we need, and most of the rest don't have enough to survive, let alone thrive.

Oh, we're making progress.

We're opening our hearts and hands.

We're finding our way to one another.

But there's a long way to go yet to make God's kingdom come

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Woods, in a blog.

in all its glory on this earth.



Still, there are bright spots.

One local trend is especially encouraging to me.

A spotlight is now shining on bullying,

and throughout the metro area

teachers, students, and administrators,

psychologists and agencies,

police departments and community centers,

pastors, lay staff, and parents

are mobilizing their energies and best ideas,

their passion and *compassion*,

their anger and their pity,

to expose the soul-sickness that causes some to pick on others and bring

healing to those who are suffering –

to victims *and* to perpetrators.

To reverse the trajectory of escalating cruelty

and replace it with mutual caring and respect.

Where does that impulse to care come from?

Maybe Jesus's compassion and anger *are* contagious.

Look at the text again.

Jesus willingly touches an unclean man,

and by doing so, sacrifices his own status as a clean and upright Jew.

Jesus stretches out his hand in compassion

and the unclean one becomes clean.

But something else happens...

The man's "uncleanness" seems to be transferred to Jesus.

Once healed, the man who had been shunned and excluded may go wherever he wishes.

But the one who healed him “could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country...” (v. 45)

As if he had caught the disease and was now contagious himself.

Jesus. Contagious.

Maybe that’s how it *does* work:

Jesus’ radical love rubbing off on all he’s healed.

Every one of us.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.