

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

BLABBING BEGGARS

Mark 1:40-45

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

40A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." 41Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" 42Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 44saying to him, "See that you say nothing to no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." 45But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

DIAGNOSIS: Pitiful Beggars

Step 1: Initial diagnosis (External Problem) : *Begging at Arm's Length*

A leper came to Jesus begging him and kneeling. Legally, a leper could come within arm's length and no closer. He dared not touch Jesus, or he would render Jesus unclean. This is our posture before the Holy One of God. We dare not touch him due to the sickness of our sin. We must stay away at arm's length.

Supposedly the last words of mighty Martin Luther were, “We are beggars, that is true.” We admit and concur with this assessment when we come and kneel at the communion rail with empty hands stretched out at arm’s length for the body and blood of Christ. We are beggars. That is true.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Pitifully Unclean*

Leprosy was not only an array of various scary and irritating skin diseases (a physical illness), but by God’s law it rendered one unfit to enter the holy temple of God’s presence (a theological or religious illness). Even washing in the mikvah would not take this impurity away. And so, to protect the larger community, those with leprosy were banished outside the village. Normally, this led to a pitiful existence in a “judgmental” and “distancing” sense, as in: “That’s pitiful!” Or, “That’s disgusting! Keep away from me.” These are the things we often think or say from our high pedestal of moral superiority. An extremely precarious position since we all have our pitifully unclean diseases, now don’t we? We beggars should really be more empathetic with one another since we are all in the same boat.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Excluded from God’s Presence*

Worst of all (for the leper) was exclusion from God’s presence. Landless, homeless, jobless, life outside the community endangered lepers physically. Beggars die without the support of others. But even worse was the fact God’s own law required it. Leprosy uncured ultimately led to a permanent separation from God. An expulsion from God’s presence. Ditto, the sickness of our sin. Luther knew it when death stared him in the eye. Death is the ultimate verification of our beggarliness.

PROGNOSIS: Grateful Blabbers

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Touched by a Merciful God*

On his own, this leper knows that he is powerless. But he senses something very different in the healing ministry of Jesus. He says to Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean." And moved with "pity," Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be made clean!" This is "pity" of the compassionate and touching kind. Or, is Jesus moved by "anger" (the alternate and more difficult reading)? Is Jesus "angry" at the evil of leprosy? Is Jesus "angry" at what a callous community has done to this poor man? Or, is Jesus ticked-off by the word "if," as if the grace of God is ever "conditional," as, say, in the Mosaic covenant? In any case, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him compassionately, just as Jesus ultimately would do for all of us through his passion and his cross. And, through the waters of Holy Baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion, Jesus chooses to extend his cleansing and compassionate touch and press it into our hands and heads and mouths. His resurrection is the ultimate verification of his power over death and of his gracious hands-on healing approach.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Graciously Cleansed*

And we are graciously cleansed. We cannot choose to do it. A leper cannot change his spots. We cannot rid ourselves of sin. But Jesus can. And he does. His love is intentional and unconditional: "I do choose. Be made clean!" In fact, he gets "angry" only if we think there is any question about it and that his loving gracious choice is "iffy." According to an eye-witnesses, Martin Luther's final word was actually, "Yes!" He was asked, "Reverend father, are you ready to die trusting in your Lord Jesus Christ and to confess the doctrine which you have taught in his name?" And a distinct "Yes!" was his reply

(Martin Brecht, Martin Luther 3:376).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Blabbing to the End*

Sternly Jesus sends the cleansed man away, saying, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” Actually, Jesus “snorts” with anger and uses a double negative, “Say NOTHING to ANYONE!” (Does Jesus already sense the difficulties this man’s loose tongue will cost him?) But, instead his healed patient went out and began to proclaim it “freely.” What a marvelous ending! The Gospel word cannot be contained, not even by a stern command of Jesus himself. The Gospel always trumps the Law, even when the Law is laid down by Jesus. Our gratitude for gracious healing turns us from beggars into blabbers—ones who tell this happy story everywhere. The “blabbing ban” has been lifted, anyway, the day that Jesus rose from the dead and the angel said to startled women, “Go, tell” (Mark 16:7). Martin Luther called it “confessing.” This is where his trust in the Lord Jesus led him right up to his very last breath. This is the “doctrine” that he taught in Christ’s name. Touched and healed by God, we tell everyone about it and we “blab” right up to the end, the day of Christ’s return.