

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

BEGGARS CAN BE CHOOSERS

Mark 1:40-45

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Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

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 anyone; 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.

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DIAGNOSIS: Beggars CAN'T Be Choosers

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Beggars . . .*

The leper stands for all who find themselves on the outside looking in. Lepers were not only afflicted with a physical disease; they were social and religious outcasts, untouchables, persona non grata. No one wanted to be near them. Ashamed and

humiliated, they knew their place. . . at the back of the bus, at the end of line, and in the rear of the room, where they could remain invisible, hiding in their anonymity, perhaps stuck in their self-pity. Who of us has not been there? We have all had those moments when we have been **BEGGARS**, on our knees, without a leg to stand on.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : . . . *Can't* . . .

“Be all you can be. Do the best that you can. It’s up to you. You can do it. If you don’t do it, no one else will. You can do anything that you choose to do.”

We have all heard the mantras, the pep-talks and the sales pitches. You CAN, you MUST, you HAVE TO, because no one else will do it for you. We are told that we can trust no one but ourselves. But then the irony! The very same ones who bark such advice nevertheless want us to choose their programs, strategies, and 12-step programs so that we can climb out of our holes and no longer be beggars.

We beggars are desperate to fall for such fixes. Is it foolishness? Is it arrogance? Does it matter since we are suckers every time? It does not take us long to discover that the fixes don’t work. We **CAN’T** ever seem to do enough to stay on top. We CAN’T seem to shake the fear that we still might slip back into the damnable desperation we thought we could leave behind. We thought we could choose the right way but are repeatedly slapped down, sent to the back of the room and scolded that we must try harder.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : . . . *Be Choosers*

The ultimate terror comes when we realize that God has his finger in this. Even beggars are not getting a free pass. Even when we are mired in the muck, God expects us get up off our

duffs and stop feeling sorry for ourselves. Every “thou shalt . . .” assumes that we have the ability to choose something different. We must be CHOOSERS. We CANNOT NOT choose. Yet every choice takes us down the wrong road. This is not fair. We cry, “Foul!” We find ourselves defiantly complaining to the very God we are to fear, love and trust above anything and anyone else.

If we were God (which we are not, but would like to be), we would have a world where God blesses the righteous and those who try hard. We don’t care for a world where all are beggars. So, are we surprised when God “pushes back” and puts such uppity beggars like us in our place six feet under? God makes it clear. God is in charge. God has the last word. God does the choosing. For such uppity beggars that cannot be good news.

PROGNOSIS: Beggars CAN Be Choosers

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Beggars . . .*

Into this damnable situation comes Jesus, daring to defy the fate to which God has consigned all the uppity beggars who think they know how to run the show. Jesus welcomes the beggars who know they have been excluded. Jesus abruptly bursts in to this world announcing the arrival of the reign of God. Then he acts it out calling unqualified fishermen, healing the unwelcome sick and driving out the unclean demons, disrespecting social convention, religions conviction and the righteous stipulations of the Law of God. They had all colluded to exclude the outsiders, the unclean and the beggars. By contrast, Jesus embraces them (in this text he literally violates religious and social taboo by touching the leper!), heals them and dares to do it all in the name of God.

Jesus pays for his audacious generosity by becoming a beggar himself, excluded and executed with all the other beggars “outside” the city and its pecking orders of success. It appears as though even God himself has had enough of Jesus’ defiance of

such sacred boundaries. Jesus dies as the ultimate beggar crying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (16:34).

But Jesus is also "The Holy One of God." Hidden in his suffering, the amazing mercy of God is working against God's own demand for justice. In Jesus' death, mercy swallows up justice. God's embrace of beggars is accomplished. With the empty tomb and the announcement of the resurrection, the good news goes public. God's love for beggars has triumphed. Jesus' choosing to heal beggars and outcasts is vindicated. It was no wishful thinking by a misguided fool but the very will of God.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : . . . *Can Be* . . .

That is what makes the beggar in this story so amazing. Despite evidence to the contrary, he refuses to accept his plight. He dares to believe that things CAN BE different. He comes to Jesus begging, but not begging like some street vagrant who just wants a few more crumbs to help him get through another day of "the same old same old." He comes to Jesus trusting that Jesus has the power and the will to deliver him from his plight. He CHOOSES to trust that Jesus can CHOOSE to reverse his status.

His faith was not disappointed. He is healed. His faith is confirmed.

Because Jesus has risen and is alive in the world, he continues to announce his choosing of beggars through Word, Sacrament, and the ministry of the church. Beggars like us, captivated by the power of his choice, also CAN BE CHOOSERS, confident that in spite of our beggarly status, we have been chosen. In a world that lives in fear of becoming of beggar, we are certain that we are the glimmer in God's eye. Touched and healed by Jesus, we are whole and wholesome.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : . . . *Choosers*

Jesus warns the leper to be careful and not talk about what has happened. "See that you say nothing to anyone." Perhaps Jesus is all too aware of how dangerous it is to speak of the daring generosity of God in a world that has sold itself to the illusion that God can be bribed. Jesus counsels the Leper to show himself to the priests, the guardians of righteousness, to show them that Jesus was no reckless rebel but the very manifestation of God's will for this world.

Of course, such talk would eventually "cost" Jesus his life. It could do the same to the leper. (It did for many in Mark's persecuted church.) But free and confident the leper exercises the same kind of defiant freedom Jesus did. He will no longer be content to stay in his place as an outsider, sitting in silence, resigned to being last in line or at the back of the bus. He freely CHOOSES to proclaim what Jesus freely CHOSE to do for him.

Like the leper, we too can freely proclaim the Good News of what God has done in Jesus and freely join him in creating a world where outsiders, lepers and losers have places of privilege and honor all in the name of Jesus.