

## “Receivers”

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### Old Testament Lesson- Psalm 30 New Testament Lesson- Mark 1:40-45

In an article titled “God Lite,” James Edwards reflects on how “the more we obey God, the more real God becomes to us and the greater our love grows. And the more we love God, the more we become like God. It is like a good marriage,” says Edwards. “People who love their spouses want to please them; and if they do not want to please their spouses, they can hardly talk of loving them.”

Last week, I said we’d look today at the choices people make in following Jesus in their lives, or not; that we would examine what Jesus did when people were *drawn* to God but somehow failed to follow through, failed to receive and embrace what God is offering.

As Mark’s account of Jesus’ ministry unfolds, a leper is drawn to Jesus. He has heard that Jesus is going around curing various diseases and casting out demons. So he suspects Jesus might just have something to offer in his life, as well. To understand what the leper is asking of Jesus, we first need to know that the word “leprosy” in those days referred to any number of common skin rashes. The suffering of a 1<sup>st</sup> Century leper was primarily social and religious, not physical. If the priest labeled you as a leper, by law you had to cover your face and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” You were completely cut off from your family and friends, made to live out in the countryside by yourself. And anyone who touched you was also “unclean,” and had to undergo a cleansing ritual – all because of a little skin rash, and a system that focuses too much on a person’s appearance while failing to build up the faith and pass along life-giving spiritual practices. That’s quite a faith tradition we come from, isn’t it? No wonder people are a little leery when it comes to religious practices.

But remember, there are spiritual reasons for the things we do – the religious practices we maintain result in blessings that we can’t imagine or predict or ever hope to fully explain to another person. The only way someone else gets what we get, understands what we have come to believe, is if that person experiences the joys and blessings of being part of a faith community, despite its limitations and shortcomings. ***Religious faith is not taught, it’s caught.*** And Jesus knows this. When he first sees the man with leprosy, he knows right then and there that despite the religious system’s failings, it can still bring abundant, unimaginable blessings to this individual and to countless others.

That’s why after he cures the leper, he sends him back to the priest, saying, “Go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded,

as a testimony to them.” Jesus doesn’t want to just cure the man’s skin rash, he wants to straighten out this misguided system that separates people from what God is offering them....a community of faith. And to do this, he doesn’t come up with a new system, but rather, Jesus reclaims the old, tells the leper to return to the priest and follow the laws of Moses.

It’s not our religion or our churches that are failing us today; it’s how we explain and follow what we believe.

Alan Kimber, pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Lodi, California, wonders what those outside the church see when they look at us – you and me, and organized religion in general. “Maybe nothing,” he says, “i.e., we are invisible when we should be visible. Maybe a lot of hype, but not much substance. Maybe a focus only on self, i.e., introspection that leads to a disregard of others. Maybe a defense of the institution, structure, doctrine or style of worship, instead of compassion for those beyond the system (those with a social or spiritual “leprosy” that has them isolate themselves from what God is offering).”

Lastly, Kimber wonders, do they ever “see the face of Jesus, in compassion, concern and openness, (in) taking the risk to welcome and include others unconditionally.” This is what Jesus offered the leper-unconditional compassion, concern, openness, and welcome. And this is what the church offers when we set aside our manmade system in order to be true to our faith-based tradition. But is this really what we say and do – welcome and include others unconditionally? Or do we expect the people in our lives to do things our way, to believe the same things we believe, to follow the same paths we followed?

Robert Wicks in his book “Streams of Contentment” tells about “a young child who asks her mother, ‘Where did the first people come from?’ In response, her mom told her the story of Adam and Eve .... The little girl loved the story and seemed quite satisfied. A week later, as children will do, she asked the same question again, but (she asked) her dad this time. In response he went into great detail about a particular kind of monkey-like creature which gradually became more human and then resulted in the human race. The child (was confused), so she went back to her mother and told her what her father had said. Her mother responded reassuringly, “Oh, don’t worry about that. Dad was just explaining about his side of the family”

We don’t all have to have exactly the same understanding of scripture. God is big enough to embrace churches and families that have either a belief in creationism or evolution or some spiritual understanding of both.

We don’t all have to believe the same thing. There’s plenty of room for different ways of interpreting our relationship with God and with one another. The important thing is that we seek a relationship with God, and don’t give up on one another.

When Jesus cleansed the leper, he opened the way for him to not only reconnect with family, friends, and his community, but to have a positive influence on the very system that had failed him in the first place. Jesus sends him back to the priest, tells him to stick it out, to continue doing what people have been doing down through the centuries – to offer for his cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them. And instead of following Jesus’ lead, the leper goes his own way. He’s drawn to God’s healing, but he fails to follow through, to become a positive influence in a broken system. Jesus knew that God was up to something bigger in cleansing the leper, that it wasn’t just about one person, but rather what that one person could contribute in straightening out the whole system. The great thing about the church and our religious practices is there’s always room for forgiveness and trying to get it right.

Last week I invited you to have an open, honest, faithful conversation with another human being, and if possible, to clear something up between you and another person in your life. If you did that, or if you plan to do that in the near future, afterwards look for what possibilities present themselves for building on that success, for establishing new practices and a new system that helps the two of you sustain your relationship with God and with one another. Maybe it’s one-on-one time where you check in to see how the other person’s doing, and to pray for each other. Maybe it’s just asking if it’s OK if you pray for the other person yourself – pray that he or she would continue to receive and to know God’s blessings. There’s no telling what positive effect such a prayer might have on the other person, as well as you. In cleansing the leper, in clearing things up for him, Jesus had hoped to cause a ripple effect, to open the way for countless others to be welcomed back into their community. As it turned out, the leper missed what Jesus was trying to do. Maybe he was only concerned about himself; maybe he wasn’t really listening to Jesus, maybe he couldn’t imagine ever going back to the priests who treated him so badly. Whatever it was, the leper failed to do what Jesus asked of him, to receive what God was offering him. We can’t be sure what our best efforts will result in when we reach out to another person. We certainly can’t control someone else’s life. Jesus didn’t force the leper to do what he knew was best. And just like Jesus, all we can do is ***point someone in the right direction, and leave the rest up to God.*** And continue to pray for that person while offering unconditional compassion, concern, openness, and welcome. In our faith tradition there is no other option.

A woman went to her doctor with a catalogue of complaints about her health. The physician examined her thoroughly and became convinced that there was nothing physically wrong with her. He suspected it was her negative outlook on life, that her bitterness and resentment was the key to her feeling the way she did. He took her into a back room in his office where he kept some of his medicine. He showed her a shelf filled with empty bottles. He said to her: “See those bottles. Notice that they are all empty. They are shaped differently from one another, but basically

they are all alike. Most importantly, they have nothing in them. Now, I can take one of these bottles and fill it with poison – enough poison to kill a human being. Or, I can fill it with enough medicine to bring down a fever, or ease a throbbing toothache or fight bacteria in the body. The important thing is that I make that choice. I can fill it with whatever I choose.” The doctor looked her in the eye and said, “Each day that God gives us is basically like one of those empty bottles. We can choose to fill it with love and life-affirming thoughts and attitudes, or we can fill it with destructive, poisonous thoughts. The choice is ours.” Maybe the woman went away cured of her disease, and maybe not. All we can know for sure is that the physician (just like Jesus with leper) pointed her in the right direction. Whether she chose to follow or not is up to her.

God has pointed us in the right direction. We have been put into families, and communities, and churches, and schoolrooms, and workplaces that we can fill with destructive, poisonous thoughts, or we can fill them with love and life-affirming thoughts and attitudes. The choice is ours, and the outcome is up to God.

Amen.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Healing God, you offer your salvation, and we refuse it. You promise healing, and we prefer our woundedness. You show us what wholeness looks like, and we embrace our brokenness. Lord, you have taken on our woundedness and brokenness. Teach us to recognize how we have wasted our lives on pride and self-sufficiency, and help us to embrace our powerlessness, even as you limited your power to live among us. O Lord, we recognize that in this gathering of people, in a place like this, in times like these, there are those who are wounded, who are hurting and who are struggling with hopelessness. Lord Jesus, as you touched the hurting and healed the wounded, we pray that you would touch and heal us today.

We pray for your healing of physical needs. We pray for your healing in emotional and spiritual brokenness. We beg your healing touch on fractured relationships. Mostly, though, we pray for faith ... faith to wait and faith to stand up under the deeper hurt that often comes before your greatest healing. Give us faith to trust your healing, just as we strive to trust your living Word, and particularly the words that you taught to us, that we might pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.