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Mark 1:35-45  
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## THE HUMAN TOUCH

### ***SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK***

A man riding a motorcycle made a left turn. It happens all the time. What caught my attention was the Scottish terrier that was riding in a basket in the back. It leaned into the turn perfectly and then righted itself as the motorcycle straightened out. I was working as a reporter for a small newspaper at the time, and I was always on the lookout for quirky stories that would never make it into larger papers. I followed the motorcycle until it stopped at a coffee shop. I introduced myself to the man and asked him about his dog. He said he and his dog were inseparable. The Scottish terrier was the third dog he had owned. Each dog, he said, traveled with him everywhere. “I have nothing against humans,” he said, “but they can’t compare to a good dog.”

One of the tragedies of modern Western life is how alone so many of us feel. Something within us longs for companionship. If humans don’t meet the need, well, why not a dog? The hunger for deep and meaningful relationships comes from being made in the image of God—who exists in three persons, each of whom is in constant relationship with the others. We want to know and be known, to love and be loved. The relationships that we quite properly desire, however, often elude us. Many of us therefore feel isolated. Some who feel especially alienated act out in destructive ways.

Can anything other than a good dog help us? A passage in the Gospel of Mark comes to our aid.

Mark 1:35-45:

**In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there. Simon and his companions searched for Him; they found Him, and said to Him, “Everyone is looking for You.” He said to them, “Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for.” And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out the demons.**

**And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.” Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, and He said 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.” But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.(1)**

### **The leader you can trust**

After an eventful day in Capernaum in which he came to the notice of the entire city, Jesus meets with God apart from his disciples and the crowd that he had attracted. He goes to a secluded place, which recalls his encounter with Satan in the wilderness (Mark 1:12-13). He emerged from the wilderness with a mission to preach about the kingdom of God in the region of Galilee. As readers, we wonder what will come of his retreat to another secluded place.

Jesus is so eager to meet with God that he rises while it’s still dark, but Simon and others—presumably Andrew, James, and John—would rather he resume the activities of the prior day. They hunt him down and inform him that folks back in town, where he healed the sick and cast out demons, are clamoring for his attention. The kingdom movement that Jesus launched in Capernaum got off to a spectacular start, and Simon and the others want him to return to capture the moment. “Everyone is looking for you,” they say, but Jesus, to the chagrin of his followers, was looking to God.

Jesus emerges from the secluded place with a renewed sense of mission that confounds the expectations of his followers and disappoints the people of Capernaum, who want more healings and exorcisms. Jesus tells his followers that it’s time to move on. He came into Galilee preaching the gospel, and now he announces his intention to leave Capernaum and preach in other, less populated Galilean towns. Jesus’ retreat has served to reaffirm his original sense of mission.

The presidential hopefuls have invaded our state in hopes of winning our votes in Tuesday’s primary. The candidates come equipped with a cadre of managers and pollsters to help them court the particular segments of the voting public they need in order to win: soccer moms, NASCAR dads, and what have you. When the candidates speak, we suspect that they’re not telling us what they really believe but what they think they need to say in order to get elected. Simon is like a campaign manager who comes to Jesus with the latest poll results. Capernaum is going for Jesus big-time.

Jesus, however, doesn’t pay attention to public opinion polls or campaign managers. He doesn’t care about expectations. Unlike most of us, he doesn’t need popularity to bolster his identity. He isn’t running for anything. His mission doesn’t depend on public approval. He doesn’t need a ministry of thousands. In fact, he forsakes a ministry of thousands. He doesn’t need adoring fans. He doesn’t need our votes. He isn’t interested in what’s popular or in being popular. He’s not listening to Karl Rove or James Carville. He’s listening to the Father, and he’s getting up in the middle of the night to do so.

When you listen to Jesus, you’re not listening to spin; you’re listening to the truth. You’re getting the straight scoop. When he asks you to follow him, you know he’s listening to the Father. Isn’t it reassuring, particularly in the middle of the political

season, to know that our leader is not pandering to—and is not swayed by—public opinion?

### **Our goal: to follow Jesus**

Jesus' message is that God, at long last, is establishing his kingdom—that is, his healing and loving rule. Jesus will not be drawn into a sedentary mission that emphasizes healings and exorcisms. The healings and exorcisms go hand in hand with his message. The in-breaking of the kingdom of God means the defeat of demons and disease. Jesus' mission, however, is not to heal as many people as possible. For Jesus, the message takes precedence. His mission, at least at first, is that of an itinerate preacher who heralds the arrival of the kingdom of God. He knows that he will be opposed by powerful forces, both human and demonic. To stay put is to be a sitting duck.

Jesus will stay on the move, confounding his enemies and avoiding arrest, through 10 chapters of the Gospel of Mark. Only when he arrives in Jerusalem will he stay put—and only after meeting with God, once again, in a secluded place (Mark 14:32-42). Jesus would not leave Jerusalem, as he left Capernaum, to preach in nearby towns about the kingdom of God. No, he would stay in Jerusalem to bring in the kingdom of God.

For now, though, he brings his message to the synagogues of other Galilean towns, just like he brought it to the synagogue of Capernaum. He goes into the synagogues, and the demons go out. The kingdom of God isn't just arriving in Capernaum; it's arriving all over Galilee. It's arriving not in a place but in a person: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God.

Jesus entrusts us with his message—the good news that God is establishing his healing, loving rule on earth. The message takes precedence. We must not sublimate it, compromise it, or water it down. Healings and exorcisms, and what today we call “social justice,” go hand in hand with the message. The message of the gospel, however, gives rise to social justice. Social justice does not give rise to the message. When we bring God's healing to the world in acts of social justice, we are bringing the gospel to bear on the world. We are not simply helping people; we are putting hands and feet on the gospel. We are heralding, whether we open our mouths or not, the arrival of the kingdom of God in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our goal, though, is not to heal as many people as possible. Neither is it to save as many people as possible. Our goal isn't a ministry of thousands. Neither is it popularity. Our goal is to follow Jesus. He will lead us to take the message of God's healing love to the world. His leading, however, is sure to confound us at times, just as it confounded his first followers. He may lead us to heal and save thousands; on the other hand, he may not. He'll tell us to leave Capernaum, where the possibilities for ministry seem endless, and remain in Jerusalem, where ministry comes to a screeching halt. He'll tell us to move when it seems as if we should stay put. He'll tell us to stay put when it seems as if we should move. He will close doors that we want opened and open doors we want closed. He will, however, impart to us his wisdom, wrought in his eternal relationship with the Father, through his Holy Spirit.

To receive this wisdom, we must, from time to time, go to a secluded place and pray, just as Jesus did. Everyone was looking for Jesus in Capernaum, so he needed to get away. Everyone, seemingly, is looking for us in the Silicon Valley. People have

expectations of us. Therefore, we need to get away to some place in our lives where we can listen to Jesus. Most people in your life are not going to encourage you to forget about them in order to spend time with Jesus. Some people, like Simon, may be disappointed if you disengage. If, however, you are going to say no to popular opinion and yes to Jesus, then you'll need to invest in your relationship with him.

Consider breaking away from your routine to spend a day with Jesus on a regular basis—say, once every three months or twice a year. Pray. Think. Walk. Write. Read. Reflect. Don't worry if your mind wanders. A good day with Jesus includes meanderings of the mind. A wandering mind inspires prayer, as you think of things to pray for, and it also springs from prayer, which inspires new paths of wandering.

### **Jesus heals a leprous man**

Simon and the other followers of Jesus came and found him in a secluded place. Now, a man afflicted with leprosy, who had to live in a secluded place in adherence to the Mosaic Law, comes to Jesus. Jesus refused the implied request of his disciples to follow them back to Capernaum. Now, a leprous man makes an implied request. Unlike the disciples, for whom the will of “everyone” was paramount, this man appeals only to the will of Jesus. He believes that Jesus can cleanse him—that is, heal him and make him ritually clean. If he's cleansed, he can rejoin the community from which he's been excluded. For him, the only question is whether Jesus will cleanse him.

Our narrator takes pains to tell us that Jesus stretches out his hand and touches the man. If the narrative were a movie, this part would be in slow motion. What's the point? Jesus is touching a leprous man, and touching a leprous man makes one ritually unclean. Someone afflicted with leprosy was required to call out, “Unclean, unclean,” so that no one would approach him (Leviticus 13:45-46). Jesus was unconcerned with public opinion when his followers wanted to return with him to Capernaum; now he's unconcerned with being infected and with becoming ritually unclean. Jesus touches an untouchable. He also speaks to the man, whose interaction with other humans would have been limited. Jesus was moved with compassion not only to heal the man but also to heal him in a particular way that would minister to him: by touching him and speaking to him.

Just as the demon left the man in the synagogue of Capernaum and just as the fever left Simon's mother-in-law, the leprosy leaves this man. Demons and disease are on the run—even the dreaded disease of leprosy, which was considered infectious and which excluded people from community.

Having cleansed the leprous man, Jesus emphatically commands him to do three things:

- Keep quiet about his healing.
- Show himself to the local priest, in accordance with the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 13).
- Make a sacrificial offering, also in accordance with the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 14).

Jesus' strategy regarding publicity comes off as flexible in the Gospel of Mark. In this case and at other times, he orders those he has healed to keep quiet (Mark 5:43, Mark 8:26). In one case, however, he orders a man to spread the news (Mark 5:19). At this point, he is concerned that publicity will hinder his mission to preach in the towns of Galilee. The message—the good news that God is establishing his healing rule through

the Lord Jesus Christ—takes precedence, but wisdom will, at certain times and places, advise us to be silent, for reasons sometimes known and sometimes unknown.

Jesus does, however, want the man to speak to one person: a local priest who would be able to give him a clean bill of health so that he could rejoin the community. To make an offering, the man would have to make a pilgrimage from Galilee to the temple in Jerusalem. The offering would serve as a witness concerning Jesus to the priests and others in Jerusalem who became aware of it. In a sense, it would prepare Jerusalem for Jesus' arrival there. Jesus wants Jerusalem, his eventual destination, to be aware of the healing, but not Galilee, where he is launching his mission. When he gets to Jerusalem, he'll be finishing the job, not starting the job, and there would be no need to keep quiet about him any longer. In the end, testimony concerning the healing of a leper would be evidence that the kingdom of God had arrived. Evidence of Jesus' healings would serve as a witness against those who disbelieved him (Mark 6:11, 13:9).

Mark is unconcerned with reporting whether the man obeyed the commands to see a priest and make an offering. He does, however, report that the man disobeyed the first command by spreading the news. Until now, Jesus has called men and they have followed, and both demons and diseases have obeyed his commands. The ex-leper, though, disobeys one of his commands, even though Jesus literally "cast out" the man, just as he had cast out demons. Demons and diseases are compelled to obey Jesus; a human, on the other hand, has a choice.

Literally, the man began to "preach" and to make known "the word," activities associated in the immediate context with Jesus himself (Mark 1:38, 2:2). Jesus literally was "able" to make the leper clean, but publicity generated by the leper's disobedience means that Jesus is literally no longer "able" to publicly enter a city. Jesus, like a leper, stays in unpopulated areas. The leper becomes like Jesus, and Jesus becomes like the leper.

When Simon and his companions wanted Jesus to stay in Capernaum, Jesus said, "Let us go ..." The disciples didn't get what they wanted. The leprous man, on the other hand, got what he wanted. However, after healing him, Jesus told him to "go," but he disobeyed. For the first time in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus doesn't get what he wants.

Mark's two-part story began with Jesus in a "secluded place" and it concludes with Jesus in "unpopulated areas." (The two Greek words translated "secluded place"—*erēmos topos*—are the same words translated "unpopulated areas," although "place" is singular and "areas" is plural.) Just as the disciples found him in the secluded place, crowds of Galileans find him in the secluded places. People in the north flock to him from literally "all directions" of Galilee, just as people in the south flocked to John the Baptist from "all" Judea (Mark 1:5). Jesus wanted to preach in the synagogues of Galilee, but the synagogues, in a sense, come to him. In a sense, he becomes the synagogue. Jesus commanded the ex-leper to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but Galilee, in a sense, is making a pilgrimage to Jesus. Mark will make it even more evident in his next story that what used to happen in a place is now happening in a person: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God.

### **Hearing and feeling Jesus**

Some of us, perhaps, resonate with the leprous man: we're living in seclusion. We may be living a solitary life: living and working and playing apart from others. Because

of our personalities and history, we face immense social challenges. Others of us relate with others well enough but maintain an emotional distance. No one really knows us, because we're afraid to be known. Most of us, perhaps, feel isolated in one way or another.

Henri Nouwen, who worked for many years among severely disabled people, shares these reflections:

*In the Western world, the suffering that seems to be the most painful is that of feeling rejected, ignored, despised and left alone. In my own community, with many severely handicapped men and women, the greatest source of suffering is not the handicap itself, but the accompanying feelings of being useless, worthless, unappreciated and unloved. It is much easier to accept inability to speak, walk or feed oneself than it is to accept the inability to be of special value to another person. We human beings can suffer immense deprivations with great steadfastness, but when we sense that we no longer have anything to offer anyone, we quickly lose our grip on life. Instinctively we know that the joy of life comes from the ways in which we live together and that the pain of life comes from the many ways we fail to do that well.(2)*

Whether we suffer from a disability or not, many of us live with the sense that some defect makes us unacceptable to our world. Can Jesus heal us? Yes. The leprous man believed that Jesus could heal him. Will Jesus heal us? The narrative gives us every reason to believe that he will—that is, if we want to be healed. In Capernaum, publicity was getting out of hand. Jesus refocused by meeting with the Father. His mission is to preach, not heal. He leaves Capernaum, meets a leprous man, and what happens? Jesus knows that he'll be placing his mission at risk if he heals the man. Nevertheless, he feels compassion for the man and heals him—almost, it seems, against his better judgment. The success of his mission now depends, apparently, on the obedience of the man he has healed. The man, however, spreads the news, forcing Jesus to change his plans and live like a leper. Paul says that Jesus “knew no sin” but “became sin on our behalf” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus places his mission at risk because of compassion. Because of the compassion he feels for you, Jesus is willing to risk his mission in order to heal you. Our disobedience means that he became what we are—a sin-stained human—that each of us might become what he is: a son of God.

How does Jesus heal us? In the way that we need to be healed. If we're living in isolation, apart from deep and meaningful human relationships, Jesus speaks to us and touches us. And let's not forget: Jesus is human. One of the ways we hear and feel Jesus is through the words and touch of the people who, through his indwelling Spirit, constitute his body. The leprous man believed that Jesus could heal him. We must believe that Jesus can heal us through his people. We have to let a few of his people into our hearts that he might do his work. We may need to find or create a group of Jesus' followers who are willing to open their hearts to each other. In such a fellowship, we discover that other brothers and sisters struggle just as we do, sometimes in exactly the same way. Many men, for example, believe that their issues with pornography and masturbation place them in the minority until they open up to a few brothers. To be healed, we need to come out of hiding. In the darkness, our secrets terrorize us. When we expose them to the light, we can deal with them.

In the movie *Secrets and Lies*, a woman is unable to conceive but she and her husband don't share this information with their extended family. The secret eats away at the couple's relationship for 15 years. The wife, in particular, fears what would happen if her secret got out. Finally, at an intense family gathering, the husband blurts out the couple's secret. As soon as the words emerge from his mouth, he says, "There, I said it. No thunder. No lightning." He was surprised how easy it finally was to open up. Keeping the secret, it turns out, was more damaging than the secret itself.(3)

When we expose our secrets in the presence of the people of Jesus who offer us his love and acceptance, we are on the way to being restored to community. If you are in a small group whose members keep their hearts from each other, take the initiative to share your heart. By doing so, you might unlock the hearts of other members as well. You might just start a revolution.

My first exposure to the body of Christ opened my eyes to see relationships in a new way. When I was a teenager, the last thing you did in my circles was tell people what you really felt. Certain things just weren't discussed. The high school students in the youth group that I joined, however, were relating to each other in a more open way. They even opened up in public settings about their struggles. I didn't know people anywhere related to each other with such vulnerability. As a teenager, my heart had been closed off to everyone. The youth group's openness, however, attracted me. It helped me open up not only to the members of the group but to Jesus himself. The youth pastor then brought us to a Sunday night worship service at Peninsula Bible Church, where two dozen or so people stood up in front of hundreds of people and shared their hearts. One even confessed that he attempted suicide. When I was 16, I knew people attempted suicide; I just didn't know anyone talked about it. I wasn't sure how to process what I witnessed that night, but I am sure it helped me understand that it wasn't necessary to live my life closed off to the rest of the world.

Will you let Jesus, either directly or through his people, speak to that part of you that needs to be healed? Will you let him touch you there? Will you let him heal you and enfold you into his community?

If Jesus became what we are that we might become what he is, then we who have been touched by Jesus become healers also. We offer the healing of Jesus through words and touch to those who ache for deep and meaningful human relationships. Doctors have discovered that some catatonic patients on occasion show some change in expression when someone speaks their names or touches them.(4) Even simple words and touch, especially if they're personal, can reach into a heart. I remember visiting a church some years ago. I sat in a chair next to the aisle in the back a few minutes before the worship service started. Shortly thereafter, I felt a hand brush against my shoulder and I heard the words, "Hello, brother." The man was walking down the aisle past me. He didn't stop, nor did he look at me. His gesture, though, struck me as genuine and reached into my heart. I felt appreciated. I don't remember anything about the worship service—neither the sermon nor the music. But I remember that someone touched me.

The most powerful healing force in the world resides in us and among us: the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ. We release the Spirit when we open our hearts to each other, when we accept each other, when we look into each other's hearts and speak words of affirmation and correction, and when we touch each other with sensitivity.

## The loneliest place on earth

Jesus goes into seclusion to seek the will of the Father. He comes out of seclusion and risks everything in order to bring us out of seclusion. Our disobedience, like that of the former leper, sends him back into seclusion.

Taken together, the two stories in Mark 1:35-45 point both backward and forward in Mark's narrative. First, Jesus went to the wilderness, a secluded place, and encountered Satan. Later, after traveling to Jerusalem, he went to another secluded place, Gethsemane, to pray: "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will." By all appearances, the Father told him to stay in Gethsemane and wait for the approaching mob. Finally, our disobedience sent Jesus to the loneliest place on earth: Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. Just as in the wilderness, he encountered Satan at Golgotha—this time in the taunts of the passersby, chief priests, and criminals. Yes, he prayed to the Father again in the secluded place: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" But the Father, having withdrawn his presence, didn't answer. Why? Because at Golgotha, Jesus became sin on our behalf. He became what we are that we might become what he is. Now, just as people came to Jesus from everywhere in Galilee, people are coming to Jesus from everywhere in the world.

Come to him. Look, he's stretching out his hand. Feel him touch you. Hear him speak to you. Let him heal you. Let him enfold you into his community. Then, follow the Spirit of Jesus as he moves you to stretch out your hand, to touch others, and to speak to them that they, too, might be healed.

## Notes

- (1) A Jesus goes to a secluded "place" (35).
  - B Simon and others come to Jesus (36-37).
    - C No healing in Capernaum; Jesus commands disciples: "Let us go" (38).
    - D Jesus "preaches" (39).
  - B' Leper comes to Jesus (40).
    - C' Jesus heals leper, commands him to "go" (41-44).
    - D' Leper "preaches" (45a).
  - A' Jesus stays in wilderness "places"; many come to him (45b).
- (2) Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Life of the Beloved* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co.), 72-73.
- (3) *Secrets and Lies* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox).
- (4) Oliver Sacks, *Awakenings* (Vintage Books).

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