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Sick of Religion?: Don't Touch That!
Mark 1:40-45

It is a tough time to “be religious.” A survey done in 2017 revealed that, for the first time, those who were unaffiliated with any religious group—the “Nones” as they have come to be known—constitute the largest single group in America. Researchers tell us that 59% of Millennials have abandoned the church. And when you drill down into that statistic, you discover an increasing number of people are frankly...just sick of religion. They don't like or trust religious institutions. They don't like or trust religious leaders. They are tired of headline-grabbing pastors who have been called out for abuses of power or sexual misconduct or financial shenanigans. They are just sick of it.

I Googled the words “sick of religion” and got 157 million hits; an endless stream of hateful and vulgar comments. Most of the attacks are against the institutional Church. But many are attacks against Jesus in which he is ridiculed and mocked with some of the most profane comments and disgusting images imaginable. It was painful to look at.

And ironic! Because if the gospels reveal anything about Jesus, it is this: He, TOO, was sick of religion! Not his faith. He was a faithful worshiper of his Heavenly Father; an observant and faithful Jew. We often find him in synagogue. But he was clearly sick of the hypocrisy and judgmentalism and arrogance of the religious authorities. The Romans were not enemy number one. It was the Pharisees whose man-made rules he was not willing to obey and whose incessant criticism plagued him. In the end, it was not the Romans who killed Jesus. Pilate would have let him go. It was the religious leaders who crucified Jesus. Religion not only made Jesus sick; it killed him.

So...since we live in a culture that is largely disgusted with institutional religion.... and since we serve a Master who himself was pretty disgusted with institutional religion... it might be worth exploring the aspects of religion that drove Jesus nuts. Maybe it will make US a little less religious ...and a little more Christian. And we begin with an astounding story at the very end of Mark chapter 1.

And [Jesus] went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and 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, for a proof to them.” But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.

I grew up on a little farm in Yakima. We had dogs, cats, rabbits, gerbils, snakes and a good-for-nothing horse named Monty. All those critters left a variety of souvenirs around the yard: feathers, fur, hair balls, skeletons and poop. Lots of poop. One of the ways we entertained ourselves was with road apple wars. You know what road apples are, right? Horse manure. Road apple wars? I leave it to your imagination. Apparently, there was a theme, because we also had Frisbee fights with dried cow patties. Also yucky, especially when the patty wasn't as dry as we first thought. I'm not sure how many times my mom cried, "Don't touch that!" But it never quite seemed to stick.

In Jesus' time, there were LOTS of religious people saying, "Don't touch that!" Observant Jews were forbidden to touch any dead thing; otherwise it rendered them spiritually unclean. It was forbidden to touch your food until you had undergone a thorough ritual cleansing. You were forbidden to touch a woman who was not a family member. Even today, when you meet an observant Jew, before you shake their hand you ask, "Are you shomer negiah?" (Which means, "Are you observant of touch?")

There was a LOT of "Don't touch that!" in Jesus' time. But there was no touch more forbidden...more horrifying...than the touch of a leper. Leprosy was a word used to describe a wide array of skin diseases. Some of them were horrific, as you can see from this image. And because leprosy was often contagious...and incurable... the diagnosis of leprosy was a social, emotional, financial and spiritual death sentence. Lepers were cut off from their families, friends and synagogues and required to live in isolated colonies. They had no means of making a living so they had to beg. And because even brushing against them would be taboo, when they were out in public, lepers had to tear their clothing, leave their hair uncombed, wear a mask over the lower part of their face, remain at a distance of 50 feet, ring a bell and cry out, "Unclean, unclean!"

Can you imagine walking around, warning people that you are coming, by pronouncing this awful judgment upon yourself: "Unclean, unclean! Don't touch me. Stay away from me. I am filthy. I am dirty. I don't really belong here!" Can you imagine?

For those of us who lived through the eighties, we CAN imagine it. Do you remember AIDS? Aids ribbon. People began to fall sick and die of a horrible, incurable disease and, no one really understood anything about it. AIDS was a death sentence and it terrified everyone. When I was a student in Scotland, I had a housemate who was a hemophiliac and acquired AIDS through a blood transfusion. One day I inadvertently drank from his coffee cup. I still remember being irrationally terrified that somehow, I might end up with AIDS as a result. Crazy...but it was a crazy, scary time.

But there was nothing irrational about the terror people felt towards leprosy. That is why they had clear, hard and fast rules for keeping lepers in their place...and far from "normal" human beings. Which makes the behavior of OUR leper so outrageous... and courageous!

Jesus and his disciples had been on a tour through Galilee preaching, battling evil spirits, healing people by the droves. His reputation obviously preceded him. **And so...in one of the gutsiest moves you will find in scripture...a leper decided**, "What the heck! What do I have to lose?" So he dared to approach Jesus...dared to violate his personal space ...knelt down before him and made a profound statement of faith: "If you will, you can make me clean!"

Now if it was forbidden for lepers to approach a “normal” person...it was DOUBLY forbidden to approach a rabbi. Rabbis HAD to be ceremonially clean to do their work. This leper was threatening Jesus’ ability to do his work! But that didn’t stop him.

Typical of Mark, we don’t get much color commentary. We aren’t told what others were thinking or saying or doing. But we can certainly imagine! Can’t you see the contorted faces of disgust as they recoiled, horrified that Rabbi Jesus might become contaminated! “Don’t touch that!” we almost hear them screaming. “Don’t touch that loathsome!” But Jesus DID touch that.

We read that he was “moved with pity.” Another translation says he was “filled with anger.” Not because the leper approached him. Jesus was filled with anger at what this disease had done to him. Angry at his pain...his isolation. Perhaps angry at a cultural system that deprived him of family, friends, faith. So...Jesus touched him.

That’s what’s most incredible and precious about this story. Not just that Jesus allows this pariah to approach him. Not just that he heals him, because he could have done that with a word. When he cast out the evil spirit in the synagogue, he did it with a word. Next week he will heal a paralytic with a word. But not here. Jesus reaches down to the untouchable lepertouches his rotting fleshand says, “...be clean!” **This story never once uses the word “heal.”** It always uses “clean.” The leper is not just asking to be made well...he’s asking not to be filthy anymore!

How quickly did the leprosy leave him? “Immediately!” Mark’s favorite word. Immediately, the leprosy left him and he was clean. I learned this week that the human skin replaces itself every 3 and ½ weeks. Did you know that? I wish my new skin lacked some of the wrinkles of my old skin. But in 3 ½ seconds...this leper had new skin. Fresh and clean and smooth as a baby’s butt.

It made Jesus sick that this man...this child of God, created in the image of God but deformed by the brokenness of this world...it made Jesus sick that he was an outcast. An untouchable. That he was lonely and rejected and shunned and despised by the rest of society. So...Jesus broke every religious protocol. When this man dared to approach him, Jesus not only healed him...he TOUCHED him. Which might have been the greatest healing of all. Can you imagine being starved of human affection, starved of human touch...and suddenly, someone crosses the forbidden zone and lays his hand on you? **How kind it was of Jesus to heal the untouchable...with a touch!**

One of the obvious questions this story poses is: Who are our untouchables? About whom do WE cry, “Don’t touch that!” Who finds themselves shunned or reviled in our religious circles? Is it the pregnant teenager who might put bad ideas in our kids’ heads? Is it the person struggling with gender identity ...something most of us can’t even conceive of? Is it the person covered with tattoos? The alcoholic or drug addict? The homeless person? Who is your untouchable? Who belongs 50 paces away from you?

Cyndi and I were walking downtown last week. In the distance, we saw two police cars parked on Soundview. Clearly, something was going on. As we approached, I noticed a man walking away from the officers. He was unshaven, his hair was wild, his clothing shabby and he was muttering incoherently.

And as he left the police, he walked out into the middle of Soundview, muttering to himself, walking past us and up the hill. As I walked on, I turned around to look and saw that he had moved back onto the sidewalk. And it struck me: he had walked out in the middle of the street to avoid Cyndi and me. He would rather face the oncoming traffic than pass close by the two of us.

I couldn't help but think of our story. Here was a man who knew he would be found disgusting by people in our community. He wasn't ringing a bell...but he might as well have been shouting, "Unclean, unclean" as he moved the obligatory 50 feet away from us. I felt pity for him.

I'll tell you honestly, I don't know what to do with people like this. I don't want to give them money because I might be supporting bad behavior. I don't want to look them in the face because I feel uncomfortable. But over this last year, I have become convicted that I am not treating these folks in a Christ-like way. So...and this may seem pretty lame to you, but it's a step for me...I have decided that when I meet an apparently homeless person, I am going to at least look them in the eye and say, "Hello." Not very revolutionary, I know. But it represents a shift in my heart from thinking of that person as loathsome ...to thinking of them as a beloved child of God.

Of course, the homeless person may not be YOUR untouchable. Maybe it's the politician who, when she appears on TV, makes your skin crawl. Maybe you find socialists disgusting. Or maybe right-wingers make your stomach churn! Or perhaps it's a particular person in your life that you just can't stand. I confess...I saw someone last week and headed in the other direction just so I would not have to speak to them because I so dislike them. More true confessions from your flawed pastor.

I heard of a woman last week coming out of our Safeway who saw a panhandler and said, "We don't want your kind here." I'd suspect many of us share similar feelings; there are certain kinds of untouchables we really don't want in our town or on our streets or in our church or in our families or in our way.

But I don't know how we can read this story of Jesus and the leper...and not struggle with those instincts. I have no easy answers. Maybe it would start as simply as a conversation. Who is your untouchable? The person that makes your lip curl? What if you sat down this week over a cup of coffee with the person you tend to avoid? Lord knows THAT would be counter-cultural. We have all but lost the ability in our society to have civil, courteous conversations with "the opposition"... whoever the opposition might be! Can you start by being kind to your pariah? By asking questions? By listening to them?

The gospel reminds me that I serve a rabbi who stretched out his hand and touched the untouchable. And THEN it reminds me that I serve a savior who stretched out his hand and touched ME, a sinner, a pariah in the sight of God. God had EVERY reason... to keep me at a distance; to hold me at arm's length because my sin was so repulsive to him. But what did God do? He came to me. He welcomed me. He touched me. He made ME clean and called me his child. And he did the same for you...you repulsive person☺

May the Holy Spirit remind us that WE were once untouchables. May He convict us of our self-righteousness and snobbery. And may he give us the courage to reach out and touch our pariahs with the healing touch of Jesus.