

“Hands On Ministry” – Mk 1:40-45

He could hardly believe his good fortune. His heart was pounding, his ears were ringing, his chest so tight he couldn't breathe – he couldn't believe he had almost made it. He thought he would burst with the tension. But now, finally, he was so near, so close, and still nobody had noticed him. He knew all too well how he would lose this one chance if anyone should discover him, how the cry would ring out through the crowd, “Unclean! Unclean!” and the stones would start to fly. God, how that hurt. Not just the stones, he was used to them. No, the real hurt was in the rejection, in the separation, in the painful reminder that he was no longer considered human, but a dangerous ‘thing’ to be avoided at all cost.

He could remember when it was all different. The wonderful memories of times when he would come home from work – back when he had work to come home from, and a family to come home to. The greetings, the familiar rituals, the laughter and noise, and above all, the touching. Ah yes, the touching – those were the most precious memories of all, seared indelibly from being played and replayed over and over and over again in his mind. Grasping the hands of his children, hoisting them over his shoulder. The firm hand of his brother clasped on his shoulder, and the gentle touch of his wife. Ah, the touching, those were the most precious memories of all.

But he mustn't let himself fall into dreaming – this was the real world now, a world of curses and rejection and stones and hunger. Always the hunger, always the desperate hunt for scraps of food sometimes left out in compassion, but more often simply thrown away as he was. But no dreaming now, he's too close, and the danger of discovery by one of the crowd is all too real. Fortunately, they're all far too absorbed in listening to this strange and enigmatic man, the very man he's been stalking. This is it! It's now or never! He has nothing more to lose – absolutely everything else has been taken from him, including his dignity as a human being. The fears of the religiously pure have driven him away from everything he ever had – from his family, from his friends, from his neighbours, from his job, from the shops and the marketplace, from the towns and villages of his life, banished even from God, no longer able even to pray except in the company of others haunted like him by this disease.

But no longer! The do-or-die moment has come. This is his last chance, his last hope. If it can't, or if it won't, happen now, it will never happen. One quick dart out of the shadows and two seconds to beg, what harm can there be in that? “Master, if you will, you can heal me!” “Oh my God, wait, don't ... don't touch me!” “Oh, my God!”

Filled with compassion, the text tells us, Jesus reached out his hand, and touched the man, and said, “I am willing; be clean!”, and immediately the disease left him, and he was cured. In less time than it takes to tell it, the man who had been condemned to a living hell of rejection and separation from life was made instantly acceptable. A simple gesture, a word or two, and the unbridgeable chasm that separated the diseased man from all that he knew and all whom he loved had been bridged. In an instant he had moved from the other side where there was no hope, to this side where hope comes true, and was lived daily. All barriers had been dropped, all doors that had been slammed in his face were now thrown open wide.

Well, sort of. To be sure, although he was now instantly acceptable to God and to God's people, it didn't necessarily mean he would actually be readily accepted. He still had to observe the rituals, the rites of cleansing and reconciliation to convince both the religious and the skeptical that he was indeed cured, and there would no doubt be many who would, for a while at least, steer clear of him. But none of that could or would dampen his enthusiasm at being made instantly acceptable, nor could it, or would it, or did it dampen his desire to proclaim to all who

would listen (and probably to many who wouldn't!) just how it had happened, and about the man of God who had made him so. Can you imagine how insufferable he must have become, talking about nothing else but how this Jesus had saved him from a life worse than death? Can you imagine how he couldn't get enough handshaking, back-slapping, shoulder-rubbing and hugging -- how he couldn't get enough touching? How he exulted like a child with a new toy over such mundane things as buying bread, or taking out the garbage?

We don't know much about what happened afterwards, apart from what we're told about how he managed to disrupt Jesus' ministry, disobeying the strict instructions to tell nobody by telling everybody, and causing such huge crowds to flock to see Jesus that he had to avoid the towns. There's no record that Jesus 'took back' the cure, though. No record that Jesus condemned the man for ignoring his strict instruction to be silent and exultantly blabbing about who had cured him, and how. No record except for the continued mission of this man of God who could cure with a touch and a word, who could reach out and in characteristic self-surrender through his own death and resurrection make all who would accept it become instantly acceptable themselves.

We need to pause and pay special attention to a couple of things that happened in this miraculous incident, because of what it means to us in our lives. First of all, we need to note that this is no "Jesus and me" private or internal healing story. This is not a story about some magic hidden and internal spiritual transformation, about cleansing the soul and leaving the exterior the same old person. This is a tale of interaction, of the fabric of life woven from healthy relationships being made whole again. The healing injunction of "be clean" transformed not just the inner soul of this poor man, but totally affected forever his entire outward world. Instantly restored was his access to people: to family, friends, neighbours and strangers alike. Instantly restored was his access to God in worship with the company of other, and the ability to sing at the top of his lungs hymns of praise and thanksgiving and deliverance. (We don't know if his singing voice improved also, but we can hope it did!) This is a story of external restoration, of being regrafted into community, a story of all life being re-opened to him -- talk about a practical, meaningful and working definition of re-birth in Christ, totally removed from a false me-only inner spiritual glow that the term rebirth has been given lately.

We must also note in this story the action of Jesus. He reached out and touched the man. What more would Jesus have to do to demonstrate that he had come not to condemn the world (see John 3:17) but that people might find life -- die on a cross? Here, filled with the compassion of God for the restoration of people, even though running the risk of being condemned himself, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the unclean man,. Jesus did not -- does not, will not -- stand righteous and aloof, giving religious directions from a distance. Walking, talking, eating, drinking, and yes, touching, sinners like you and me, bringing instant acceptability, offering rich and abundant life.

No conditions were set before Jesus cured him; he did not have to grovel, or beat his chest, or do years of humble service. He did not tell the man to go get clean first and then come back to him for certification before he would touch him ... he reached out and touched him first. Jesus reached out in response to that impassioned request, and touched him, and immediately opened up life richer and tastier than he ever could have imagined. To be sure, Jesus did tell him to go and fulfill the requirements of the religious now that he could do so with impunity, and be accepted even into the church, for life in Christ is not meant to be in splendid isolation but instead in community with others who have been healed, and those who seek his healing. But first Jesus reached out, and touched him.

We can see how this poor man's life, a life of misery and rejection and hell, was changed in an instant by Jesus' healing touch, can't we? We can even see how Jesus changed his life not by changing life around him, but by touching him, and making him instantly acceptable to both God and man. If we dare to admit it, we can even see how Jesus has touched us, and made us clean, and whole, and instantly acceptable to God.

But a word of caution is in order ... we need to remember that just because we are acceptable to God doesn't mean that people will accept us. People have problems accepting other people. Recall that Jesus even instructed this man to go get certified by the priests, to jump through the hoops mandated by people.

I think one of the key reasons people have so much trouble accepting that others may have been made instantly acceptable is that we have so much trouble accepting that we have been made instantly acceptable ourselves. In our Reformed tradition we profess that in the sacrament of our baptism we have been touched by Christ just as he touched that unnamed man, and that in that touching we have been made clean, and instantly acceptable just as he was. Nevertheless we find it hard to believe that we could be acceptable to God, and so we find it doubly hard to accept that other might be as well. We need constant reminding of that touch, we seek to be touched again and again, and thanks be to God we are touched by Christ again and again. "This bread is my body", he tells us, and we are touched and accepted by him and into him. "This cup is the new covenant", he reminds us, assuring us of the times God has reached out to his people, reaching out and touching us through his Son, Jesus and through the body of Christ, the church.

And there's the key to this story ... as the body of Christ the church is called to continue the healing touch of Jesus through hands-on ministry. Ministry of the kind that many of you were involved in this morning, feeding the hungry and comforting the distressed. Hands-on ministries of all kinds that are practiced here ... the ministry of a smile and a warm, heart-felt greeting; the ministry of remembering people with notes and cards; the ministry of offering rides; the ministry of photocopying; the ministry of cutting grass and dusting pews; the ministry of taking to lunch; the ministry of bringing lunch in ... the possibilities are almost endless. It is these hands-on ministries that help us to show that we have been touched by Christ's love, and that help others to know that they in turn have been touched by Christ's love also, and in that being touched know that they are acceptable to and accepted by God. How good is that?!