

*How do you describe Jesus? (Mark 1:40-45)*

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Covenant, Stoughton

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and from Jesus, the Light of the world!

Larry loved life. Others could just see that. He deeply loved his wife and provided well for her and their kids. He bragged about his grandkids. He tended his lawn with tender care so it looked like a showcase garden. People at the plant where he worked looked to him to brighten their days with a joke or with genuine interest in them and their lives.

In his late 50s he began having nagging backaches, but with no diagnosis. Then a more sophisticated test showed problems with his prostate. A biopsy showed cancer. Treatment followed...surgery, radiation and chemotherapy. He got along okay for a while, but after a time he became too weak to continue working so he went on disability. He told me that he hated the disease, and I agreed. And while it proved tough to battle, he said one of his biggest challenges came from some friends and acquaintances who didn't know how to deal with him as a person with cancer. In the small town grocery store, he would head down an aisle and someone would turn into the same aisle, facing him, and then reverse direction so they would not meet. He felt alone, abandoned by some. Fortunately, his family and his church did not abandon him or leave him alone; he died surrounded by those who loved him.

I thought of Larry when I read this gospel incident. Like Larry, the man with leprosy knew loneliness, abandonment. He should never have even gotten close to Jesus. He broke the rules—the cultural and religious rules—to kneel by Jesus. He should have stayed at a distance and shouted, “Unclean! Unclean!”, to warn others to keep their distance from him so they would not become contaminated by his uncleanness.

I think about the early '80s when AIDS first became an issue. Many of us had great wariness about getting close to anyone with that disease. We heard how the disease could spread to others that later proved wrong. Described in some places as a "gay cancer," the HIV virus took three years to be identified and much longer than that for doctors to develop drugs that would effectively tamp down symptoms without debilitating patients. But those with AIDS often felt alone, abandoned, shunned, and they often still do.

Now let's think about Jesus. I mean, all of us. Three words. When you think about Jesus, three words... three words that you would use to describe Jesus to someone who asked. Jot them on your bulletin now. (pause, wait...) Okay, turn to the person next to you and share one. (pause, wait...) Thanks! Now if you wish, shout out a word. (pause, listen...)

Today's gospel gives me and all of us some great words to describe Jesus. Open your worship folder and look at the gospel reading with me. In verse 41, underline moved with pity. Other versions have “was indignant”, “deeply moved”, “moved with compassion”. Compassion...“a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is

stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.” That describes the Jesus I know. He feels deeply AND wants to bring relief, to bring a change.

Now in that same verse, underline touched. Wow! Jesus knew the rules. Don't get near a leper! Avoid a leper if at all possible! Never, never touch a leper! Yet Jesus touched him. Earlier in this chapter Jesus drove out an unclean spirit by the power of his word. He could have done the same here, it seems to me. But he touched the man. This man with leprosy dared to cross a boundary when he didn't yell, "Unclean! Unclean!" and came near Jesus. And Jesus crossed a boundary by actually touching him! Wow!

Again in that same verse 41, underline, "I do choose." Jesus faced decisions just as we do. He could have played it safe and withdrawn from the man. He could have told the man to go where he belonged, back to the sidelines to rejoin other outcasts and losers about whom no one really cares. But Jesus chose to bring newness, to get rid of the disease that kept the man alone, abandoned, isolated. Now the man could re-enter society; Jesus told him to go to the priest who could no longer keep him away from worship.

Just before today's reading Jesus had told his followers, "Let's go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim my message there also; for that is what I came to do." Now he couldn't go to those towns. Why couldn't he do as he planned? Perhaps because he had laid down a challenge to the religious authorities by sending the man-once-a-leper to the priest; the original language has Jesus send the man away with a note of anger, with a snort...did Jesus challenge those leaders out of anger for keeping people away from a community of care and worship? Perhaps his plans changed for another reason...Jesus had become unclean by touching the unclean man. Jesus had taken on the man's contamination when he decontaminated the man with leprosy. People knew that Jesus became unclean, yet crowds still came to him out in the country. There Jesus kept doing the God-like thing, showing compassion, reaching out and touching, choosing to cross boundaries that kept people from having love and support from others.

This Jesus has come to us with compassion, touched us, and chosen to deal with our deepest need for love and acceptance into community even of those no one else will accept. How will we respond? Will we keep silent? Will we join the man-once-a-leper and tell others about Jesus? How will we see those who cross boundaries today, pleading for help? Will we follow Jesus into the lives of those on the sidelines, those who feel alone, abandoned, isolated? How will we respond to those who need food or shelter or health care or clothing or jobs? Will the way Jesus lived and cared for all people influence how we treat others, how we work for change, how we make choices for policies and practices and leaders in our church and in our society?

I can't speak for you, but I pray that I may look through the eyes of Jesus and see every person as a precious child of God, a sister or brother God has created. And I pray that

this little light of mine, this faint reflection of the Light of Jesus will shine through me as God's Spirit moves me to have compassion, to touch the isolated, to choose to help, and to change my opinions and alter my plans in order to love like Jesus, however inept that may be.