

REACH OUT AND TOUCH

a sermon

preached in

Duke University Chapel

by

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Sermon Text: Mark 1:40-45

How appropriate for us to be talking about Jesus reaching out, touching, healing a leper on St. Valentine's Day. The gift of love, from Jesus to the leper, appeared when Jesus reached out and touched.

There are only two characters in the story of our lesson for today - the leper and Jesus. There are two messages, at least, in the lesson for today

First, there is One who can heal. There is One who can heal even leprosy. Leprosy was a dreaded disease, a loathsome disease; a disease which separated you from all the rest of society; a disease which everyone knew was incurable. But perhaps worst of all, if you had it, no one else touched you at all.

Can you imagine how much courage it took for this leper to come to Jesus, to come out in public, to kneel before Jesus, and to ask Jesus to heal him? How much courage; how much faith; how many customs, taboos, social mores, even religious laws he flaunted to dare to come out of his closet and ask Jesus for healing? We can only imagine how very, very difficult it must have been! It was hard.

It's hard for us to ask for help, isn't it? Duke students are smart, ambitious, and independent; you can make it on your own. Teenagers can take care of themselves - they don't need help - they can make it okay. Professors can get along all right; they've proven how competent and intelligent they are. Preachers can make it through life on their own (with a few prayers, of course!). Why, Christians even have a little something "extra;" we can get along quite well, thank you. Why is it so very, very hard for us to admit we have needs? Why is it so very hard for us to "go public" with our hurts - and ask someone else for help?

It must have been terribly, terribly hard for the leper to come out and ask to be healed. But, that's the first step. There probably are no lepers here today who need to be healed from leprosy. But, there probably are lots of us here today who need healing of some kind.

It may be awfully hard to step out and ask for someone to help. Whatever your need, your hurt, your hope, your cry, there is someone who can heal.

Second, Jesus showed us the importance of responding to others in need. It took a lot of daring, a lot of courage, a lot of faith for Jesus to reach out and touch the leper. No one did that. You would not be caught dead touching a leper. It just was not done.

That's what Jesus did, however. That's what Jesus calls you and me to do: To do the daring, the unexpected, the unusual, the abnormal - if necessary - to help someone in need. Even to break religious and civil law - if necessary - in order to meet human need. The most important thing you or I can do is not necessarily to be "good, law abiding, religiously pure, socially proper, culturally correct citizens" in our church, our community, or in this great land of ours.

The most important thing you and I are called to do is to care for human beings - and to care so much we will bring healing anyway we can. Even if it means breaking the law or custom or religious code.

That is why some folks pour blood on draft records; why some folks will lie down in the streets in protest; why some folks will march where they are not supposed to march, rally where they are not supposed to rally, break the law when they are not supposed to break the law. There are some things more important than law or custom or religious tradition: People are. The lives and well-being and wholeness and health of people are more important than laws.

God calls us - you, me, and everyone who claims the Lordship of Christ to do as our Lord did: To reach out and touch and heal - to love - to love others so very, very much we will be willing to break with custom to bring wholeness to a fellow human being.

Let's do like Jesus did. Let's shock some folks today.

Let's kiss some lepers, touch some untouchables, put our arms around some prostitutes, tell our leaders to "love our enemies," call down the high and mighty.

There is nothing more important than for you to be healed.

There is nothing more important than for you to heal.

Jesus said, "...this is my body broken for you..."

...this is my blood shed for you...

...do this in remembrance of me..."

Amen.