

Sermon - January 19, 2020**“Be Made Clean!”****Text: Mark 1:40-45**

Stewardship is our main topic in the next 3 Sundays. Stewardship is more than the offering of financial contributions. Some of us will agree that it also encompasses the offering of time, talents and presence. Stewardship stems from the Biblical principle that all gifts come from God and that we are merely stewards or caretakers of God's gifts. And because we are given such responsibility of being good stewards, we are challenged to share what resources, time or talents we have in the best way we could. Over the years, people have come up with a lot of different ideas about stewardship and giving. One of the best stewardship moments in this congregation happened this past Advent when everyone – young and old, supported the Sleeping Children Around the World project. We have provided a total of 140 bedkits to children in developing countries for a good night's sleep. In our gospel story today, another form of stewardship was unearthed when Jesus healed a leper. I call it the stewardship of pastoral and spiritual care.

This is one of my passions in ministry - to provide pastoral and spiritual care. I call it the ministry of presence. We have a strong pastoral and spiritual care team and other friendly visitors in this congregation who reaches out in being present to those who need care not only in times of illness, loneliness or grief, but also in moments of joy and celebration. Over the years, I have had numerous opportunities in visiting the residents in retirement and long-term care places, those in the hospitals and those needing care in their homes. My office is always open to those who drop-in for a chat or for a prayer. My heart gladly opens up as we exchange a comfort hug or a hand shake, as we share life stories together, as we lift each other in prayer or offer words of inspiration from the Bible and other inspirational books. I glean from all of these experiences that pastoral and spiritual care is about interconnectedness - a connection that focuses on the meaning of care that has made a welcoming space for each face among us. Such care transforms our relationships into an invitation to speak from the deepest longings of our hearts, so that we, in turn, become caregivers for one another.

Today's story reminds me of those times when I offer pastoral and spiritual care. But there were moments too when I felt helpless and powerless in reaching out to those coping with illness and the possibility of death. I found myself asking these questions: What do I say that will make any difference at all? Can I do anything to ease the pain and the fear that exists -- not only to the one being offered care, but also to the family and significant others? And in those moments of helplessness, all I could do was to reach out and touch...to extend a hand in an intimate way -- extending the touch of Love.

The story of the nameless leper in Mark raise all these questions and surprisingly, also provide us with a road map, pointing out where we can discover some answers. Leprosy, as we know, was quite a common contagious disease in the ancient days, known as an outbreak of the skin and having it meant that you broke the purity law. The book of Leviticus spends an entire two chapters teaching priests how to diagnose skin diseases and how to perform rites of purification so they can be healed. If you had leprosy in those days, you were immediately shunned and cast aside. Lepers were kept at a distance and were barred from participation in community life. They were not allowed to attend worship, visit in homes, or mingle with people in public places. They were removed from community and some were left to live a life of mendicancy - begging for their survival. When leprosy strikes, it affects all kinds of people.

The nameless leper in Mark was a beggar. He was considered a nobody. He was Jewish in origin for he was aware of the rituals of cleansing. This leper is desperate for healing. And out of his desperation, he boldly crosses the boundary and comes close to Jesus. Believing in the healing power of Jesus, he came begging, nudging Jesus to make him well with a daring remark: "Master, if you choose, you can make me clean." He asked Jesus to decide whether he will heal him or not. Challenged and moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. Jesus chose to heal this man: "I do choose. Be made clean!" Jesus touched him and he was made well. This is what I call hands-on ministry; it comes with it, human touch -- not some kind of a long-distance type of pastoral care. It is a moment of being present with the other. Jesus modeled for us how we can show care and healing to those in need. If healing is to take place, we've got to be hands-on. This healing story is told as a way for us to imagine how

wholeness can be restored to individuals and human communities. By a touch, Jesus set the leper free to new life!

There are some people in this church that love the shaking of hands, a hug or a peck on the cheek that goes along with Passing of the Peace. Others wish they could disappear during this ritual. Let me share an article called *Touch in Church* from an anonymous writer: *“What is all this touching in church? It used to be a person could come to church and sit in the pew and not be bothered by all this friendliness and certainly not by touching. I used to come to church and leave untouched. Now I have to be nervous about what's expected of me. I have to worry about responding to the person sitting next to me. Oh, I wish it could be the way it used to be; I could just ask the person next to me: How are you? And the person could answer: Oh, just fine, and we'd both go home... strangers who have known each other for twenty years. But now the minister asks us to look at each other. I'm worried about that hurt look I saw in that woman's eyes last week. Also I'm concerned, because when the minister asks us to greet one another, the man next to me held my hand so tightly I wondered if he had been touched in years. This week that man told me I'd never know how much I'd touched his life. All I did was smile and tell him I understood what it was to be lonely... "Pass the peace." "The peace of Christ be with you." "And also with you." And mean it. Lord, I can't resist meaning it! I'm touched by it, I'm enveloped by it! I find I do care about that person next to me! I find I AM involved! And I'm scared. O Lord, be here beside me and touch me...so that I can care and be cared for! So that I can share my life with all those others that belong to you! All this touching in church -- it's changing me!”*

Here's another story. Henri Nouwen was a renowned pastor of L'Arche Daybreak in Toronto where a community of women and men with mental challenges and their caregivers create a home for one another. Nouwen's life and ministry revolved around healing and recognized the Christ in suffering individuals and communities. He was fully convinced that everyone has wounds that need healing, and that one's woundedness can become instruments of healing for others. Nouwen was a “hands-on” minister. His deep-seated faith in Jesus allowed him to care for those who were sometimes ignored by society – people with mental illnesses and physical disabilities. It was his care and love for these people that Nouwen experienced his own

woundedness claiming himself to be a wounded healer. He proclaimed that our “wounds allow us to enter into a deep solidarity with our wounded brothers and sisters. The main question, he said, is not “how can we hide our wounds? but “how can we put our woundedness in the service of others?”¹

All of us have wounds. We are wounded in so many ways beyond our imagination. Whether we come open or not, we need healing – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. And God has somehow come to us through people who have been wounded and become healers in good faith. Jesus is a wounded healer. Stories were told of how he heals people of their physical, moral or spiritual depravity, and brings them face to face with the wounds of their times. Today, we take the stories of Jesus in our context. Our world is wounded in so many ways. Those caught up in the endless cycle of extreme poverty, not only here in our community but all over the world. Poverty is a disease of our time that needs healing. Another wounded body is the earth. The earth is wailing as we continue to consume her resources without regard for her health and welfare of being. Violence and war are a fast-growing cancers in the body of the world. So many lives have been sacrificed in the ongoing wars in many parts of the world. And there are pains of individual wounds of loneliness, grief, depression, illness, unemployment, or broken relationships that call for our urgent care and attention. When we look closely at the healing of the leper, we can see that our calling is to help restore wholeness where there is brokenness and affliction. We are called not to stay at a distance, but to move up close, to touch the other and to be touched by their presence. We have to see others with compassion because it is through hands-on relationships that health, healing and wholeness will be found. Each act of care is an attempt to help heal a wounded person. Each hand that we place on pain or suffering-fearlessly, hopefully, sometimes unconsciously, is a hands-on attempt to heal the brokenness of the world. After all, we are like the nameless leper in the story. We were once wounded and have received healing; we've been touched by grace and we become healers in good faith. So go, become stewards of care and heal others. Heal the world. Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, 1985.