

If you were following along in the pew Bible, the New Revised Standard Version, you noticed that I use the word ‘compassion’ instead of pity.

Different translations of the Bible tell us that Jesus was moved with compassion or pity or deeply moved or moved with tenderness or even indignant.

I point this out because it was very crucial for those first century readers to hear Mark’s description of Jesus’ feelings about the leper.

Let’s be honest about it, that’s not the only way, not the only response possible to this diseased man we would meet alongside the road.

Much like another story, the Good Samaritan, that Jesus told – a Sunday School teacher asked her young class, “What would you do if you saw someone beaten and bloody, lying alongside the road?”

Little Sally answered, “I’d throw up!”

That’s a very human response. Yet, just as Jesus taught in that parable and here in our lesson in Mark’s gospel with our wretched leper, we are told that Jesus, far from being revolted, was moved with compassion.

Jesus brings to life the words of the Psalmist: “God is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.”

In fact, in the gospels, this word for *compassion* is used only by Jesus or about Jesus. It is Jesus alone who shows us, tells us, what compassion is all about.

It is used by Jesus in the story of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Unforgiving Servant

And in each case, compassion describes the action, the response of the most Christ-like figure in the story.

*Compassion* is also used about Jesus himself, when he saw this leper in our story this morning, but also towards the 5,000 who were hungry and for the Widow of Nain whose son had died.

Among the Hebrews, the root word for *compassion* is womb, the source of all life. They believed the womb was the organ of compassion just as the eye is the organ of sight.

In the gospels, the Greek word for *compassion* is where we get our word for spleen.

In other words, *compassion* is a gutsy thing!

And the word that is translated *with compassion* or *with pity* is actually a verb. More than a feeling, compassion is something we do, an action word, close to being compassionate outrage!

Throughout Mark’s stories of healing and teaching several threads seem to hold them together.

One is courage and risk, like this story, Jesus out in public, challenging the status quo. Another is to recognize that healing is a gift; we do not have to earn it. And to see that God’s love is not exclusive, rather inclusive without discrimination.

If Jesus ever means-tested anyone needing help, then this was it. He looked on them with compassion.

First of all, we see Jesus was traveling where a leper could touch him.

A word for this is ‘displacement’: to move away from one’s ordinary and proper place. Or another to put it, “moving out of your comfort zone.”

But that's exactly what most of us have worked so hard not to do. We spend enormous effort to maintain and enhance and assure our station in life, our place in the pew, the way things are, our status in society, our standard of living.

Holding on to what we claim to be our proper place reinforces the distinction we feel between ourselves and others. Our proper place is zoned comfortable and we don't want to move outside of it!

Nor do we want others to move in!

But that's exactly what the incarnation is all about. It is the scandal of the manger, the voluntary displacement of the divine from the pearly gated community we think of as heaven.

God shows up in a stable and grows up in some backwater town. Ila, Georgia is a metropolis compared to Nazareth.

The most startling picture of all in this story is that the eternal Son of the most high God traveled where a leper could cross his path.

This story presents a real challenge for communities of faith today. It calls us to ask whom we may have placed outside of God's healing love.

As a Christian community of faith, we must ask, is our ministry focused on extending the unconditional love of Christ to everyone, even those we individually and politically and socially and corporately might consider unclean?

And secondly, very clearly Jesus was willing to be touched by a leper.

Can you imagine the disciples and others who were gathered around?

"Jesus, don't do it, don't let the leper touch you. You know the law, unclean, unclean! Oh, no, the leper touched you, and now we have to eat supper with you tonight, what's that going to do to us?"

Jesus did not back off. Jesus didn't scold the leper about breaking the law...didn't condemn him for being unclean, for being clearly outside the bounds of what everyone knows God desires for righteous living.

Jesus didn't try to avoid him, didn't use his entourage to keep this leper away. Jesus refused to turn him away.

Who are the lepers, the unclean, and the outcast today?

Here are some clues:

- We will know them when we avoid them.
- We will know them when we are afraid to touch them.
- We will know them when we create boundaries to keep them out.
- We will know them when that little nagging feeling tells us we need to be available to those we are trying to avoid but go the other way instead.

Healing is most often found in love offered, relationships formed, humanity affirmed and nurtured.

Healing this way is offered regardless of skin condition, sexual orientation, gender, social and economic status, religious practice, and regardless of physical and mental disease.

And finally, Jesus touched what was not to be touched.

The gospel record tells us of many of Jesus' healing miracles, and he used many different methods, means, and on this occasion, he could have healed the leper by simply giving a word.

He chose, instead, to heal this man by touching him, by touching the untouchable, making physical contact with the one whom society and religion had condemned, had cast out.

Mark shows us in this opening scene: Jesus expanded the healing process; more than just the cure, healing means 'restoring.'

Try to see this picture: Jesus stretched out his hand touched the leper. How long had it been since anyone touched this man?

What's at issue is the generosity of grace, the healing power of a touch: Jesus comes to where we are, willing to be touched, and reaching out to you and me.

Jon Walton, insightful preacher at First Presbyterian Church in New York City, tells us that "Compassion... means to suffer with, to put yourself in the place of another, to enter into their experience. It is the primary characteristic of incarnation.

It is what God was doing in Christ when God reconciled the world to God's self. It is much more than kindness, far more radical than simply being nice. It is fulfilling the requirements of a godly life as described by Micah: doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with God, and doing all in a way that is almost imperceptible except for the compassion of it.

It is to take to oneself the sufferings of another so deeply that you empty yourself and take the form of a servant, in the manner of Jesus, who did precisely that, even unto death."

The touch of compassion is not vertical, from the healthy down to the sick. A genuine touch of compassion moves along the horizontal it reaches out from person to person, the broken to the broken, from the grieving to the grieving, from the sick to the sick, from the lonely to the lonely.

One of the great pastoral theologians of the last century was the late Henri Nouwen. He developed the idea of the 'wounded healer.'

He says that the one who is best able to offer the touch of compassion is precisely the one who has suffered, who has been wounded and can show the scars.

Maybe that's why we seem to be wired to interpret the touch of our fellow humans.

All the studies all show we feel more connected to someone if they touch us.

So, on this day, let's thank God for the compassionate and courageous people around you who have followed in Jesus' footsteps and touched you.

Who would that be for you? Who are the selfless people you know who touched your life by their compassion and courage?

Who reached out to you during one of the most critical times of your life? Who took a chance on you when others had given up? Who put their life on the line to save yours?

I know you haven't forgotten them. We never forget people who show up when we need them most.

Who needs you to be this courageous and compassionate person this week?

Faith opens our lives to our Lord's gracious answer, "I do choose, it is my will that you be made whole."

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.