

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
February 12, 2012
Mark 1:40-45
“I Do Choose”

Mark's gospel opens this way: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* Clear. Succinct. Straight to the point. And a mere nine verses later, Jesus strides out center stage and says, *The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent, turn around, and believe the good news.* Jesus calls his first disciples, including Simon Peter. He heads to the synagogue where he encounters a man with an unclean spirit, and Jesus heals him. Then he goes to Peter's house and heals Peter's mother-in-law who had been ill in bed. Soon everyone wants to see this miracle-working rabbi, but Jesus tells his disciples, *“Let us go to other towns that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came to do.”* As they go on their way, a leper stops them, begging and pleading, *If you choose, you can make me clean.* Into the midst of the group walking on that Galilean road, an outcast has now stepped: a leper, the literal embodiment of uncleanness; a man socially, religiously from the margins has now stepped center stage. The tension is broken by an unthinkable act: Jesus reached out and touched the leper. Then he said, *I do choose. Be made clean.*

A personal touch from Jesus. The voice of Jesus saying, *I do choose. Be made whole.* There are thousands of sermons preached on what that gesture and those few words mean, and hundreds of hymns singing “turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face.” That moment seems to epitomize the spirit of personal piety that is so prevalent in the contemporary American church. A one-on-one encounter with Jesus, who makes us well, who gives us peace, our personal Savior. But American piety is not grounded in the script of Mark's gospel. The Jesus who steps center stage is not a personal therapist. With Jesus, the realm of God has broken into our worldly realm; this is no private affair. Something without precedent is unfolding for us and all people for all time.

I'm reading a small book by the African American theologian Howard Thurman called *Jesus and the Disinherited*. (Web readers click here to see a preview) Thurman is from the generation prior to the civil rights movement, yet his ministry prepared the way for what was to come. He taught and preached. He visited Gandhi and learned about non-violent resistance. He founded an intentionally interracial church in San Francisco in the years after World War II when segregation and racism were the law of the land in this nation. Thurman announced that he was intent on exploring and explaining “what the teachings of Jesus have to say to those who stand at a moment in human history with their backs against the wall...the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed.”¹ Those are challenging words.



A generation or two earlier, Henry David Thoreau left normal human society and took off for the woods around Walden Pond. There he began an exercise in self-reliance reflected in his book *Walden*, in which he wrote the famous words, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Yet Thoreau wrote those words from a position of privilege; as a white male of some means, he was able to freely choose the path that led to a cabin near Walden pond. By contrast, Thurman prophetically wrote, “The masses of men [sic] live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them?”

Thurman’s is the more relevant question. And the leper in Mark’s gospel is the epitome of what Thurman was talking about. A man whose physical condition barred him from society, both secular and religious. A man disinherited, dispossessed. A man with his back against the wall. Mark’s gospel is not just about Jesus and that one man; the Christian gospel is about Jesus and the walls so many are backed up against.

Re-trace the events in the first chapter of Mark and consider the locations of the first three miracles of Christ. Jesus appeared on the scene saying, “The kingdom of God is in your midst. Repent and believe the good news.” First he went to the synagogue, the place of scripture and prayer. Kingdom work begins there, but it doesn’t stop there. Next Jesus went to the home of Simon Peter, where he healed Peter’s mother-in-law. Kingdom work is in our homes, our personal lives, but it doesn’t stop there. For next came the most radical miracle of the three, the one in which Jesus violated the regulations of his own faith tradition and broke all the accepted rules of society. Jesus touched a leper and made him clean: not in a house of faith, not in a private home, but out there in the public sphere. Out there for all to see. Jesus does the unconventional, the unlawful, so that he may accomplish that which was unstoppable.²

Which explains what happened next. Jesus sternly warned the healed man to say nothing to anyone but go straight to the priest, since only the priest could pronounce the man fully clean. Read Leviticus 13 if you want a full description of what this process looked like. Note that in every case, a priest’s word is what ultimately frees a leper from his stigma. But Jesus told the man, “*Go to the priest as a testimony, a witness to them.*” To the priestly system the man would tell his story of how an itinerant rabbi had healed him. To the system of law that kept the leper and all like him with their backs to the walls, a witness would go forth that the kingdom of God is in their midst and cannot be stopped.

This is a public witness, a confrontational witness that would be repeated several times in the gospel. In Mark 13, this warning is given to all believers, including us: *Beware, for they will hand you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them.* (Mk 13:9) But on that day, the leper failed to follow Jesus’ instruction. He ran out, telling all that he has been made clean. He spread the word publicly, so that soon Jesus will have trouble moving from town to town. The leper’s



disobedience is no big deal, though. It was inevitable that Jesus himself would have to be the one to make the testimony to the priests. Jesus himself would have to confront the powers that be, the ones whose laws excluded and kept with their backs against the walls entire groups of people. Jesus' testimony that the kingdom of God was in their midst would be given after his arrest in Gethsemane. It would be told early in the morning to the high priests and Pilate, the Roman governor. His testimony would continue from a cross and a tomb and beyond that tomb – and all of it would take place publicly.

Howard Thurman, whom I mentioned earlier, shares a powerful, modern example of a type of public testimony. In 1910, Japan annexed Korea as part of its empire. A decade or so later, when Thurman was a seminarian, he attended one of the national conventions of the Student Volunteer Movement and described what happened. "One afternoon seven hundred of us had a special group meeting at which a Korean girl was asked to talk to us about her impression of American education. [She] was very personable and somewhat diminutive. She came to the edge of the platform and, with what seemed to be obvious emotional strain, said, "You asked me to talk with you about American education. But there is only one thing that a Korean has any right to talk about, and that is freedom from Japan." For twenty minutes she made an impassioned plea for the freedom of her people, ending her speech with this sentence: 'If you see a little American boy and you ask him what he wants, he says, 'I want a penny to put in my bank or buy a piece of candy.' But if you see a little Korean boy and you ask him what he wants, he says, 'I want freedom [from Japan].'"³

The Christian gospel is proclaimed in houses of worship, and honored in private homes and individual hearts. But it was designed to go further, into the public places, where lepers cry out from the side of the road and the mass of humanity leads lives with their backs against the wall...the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. It is for them and for ourselves, children of God all, that we are to reach out and touch, and more importantly to stand up and say, "You asked me to speak on one thing, but as a follower of Christ, I must say a word about freedom, about justice, about the kingdom of God that is in our midst." Wherever we continue to exclude others because of race or age, gender or ability, wealth or sexual orientation, we must bear witness to the gospel. Wherever there are people against the wall because they lack health insurance, decent employment, safe places to live, help for depression or diabetes or drug addiction, we must bear witness to the gospel. It is at the heart of the Great Commission given to us when Jesus said, *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.* (Mt 28:19-20)



If this public faith seems too hard, if the pain of humanity and the depth of our own pain seems too great a burden to carry, much less expose through our public witness, take heart. We, too, stand with our backs to the wall. We, too, say to Christ, *If you choose, you can make me, make us, clean.* To which the words from Mark's gospel give us peace beyond all measure: *Moved with pity, Jesus stretches out his hand, touches, and says, "I do choose. Be made clean."* Christ has already chosen to help, to witness, to set the change in motion. The kingdom of God is in our midst. Jesus says, *"I do choose."* And with those words, walls come tumbling down. We are brought back to life, all of us. This is the good news of our faith. Thanks be to God.

¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press, 1949/1996; p. 13

² Cf. Jon Walton sermon "Jesus Iconoclast", Feb. 12, 2006; "He dares do the unconventional, in fact, the unlawful, so that he may accomplish the unlikely." *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, p. 358.

³ Thurman, p. 22.

