

Outside/Inside

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Mark 1: 40-45

In today's medical vocabulary, "leprosy" is called Hansen's disease. In biblical times, "leprosy" included skin conditions such as psoriasis, eczema, or seborrhea, as well as Hansen's disease. It was considered "unclean," and anyone with leprosy had to stay away from other people, as well as from the temple. It was widely believed that God would withdraw from the temple if it were to become polluted by unclean people or things.

Leprosy, like other disabilities, was considered a punishment for some sin or transgression the person suffering with it had committed. There were two types of impurity: communicable and noncommunicable. Leprosy fell into the communicable category, so sufferers were required to cry "unclean, unclean" whenever they were in the presence of others.

In this story in Mark, the man with leprosy doesn't keep his distance from Jesus at all, but kneels right in front of him. He knows Jesus isn't a priest and that by approaching him, he is breaking the purity laws. Kathy Black in *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* suggests the man is motivated by pure desperation.

The man says, "If you choose, you can make me clean." I've always been struck by that, thinking it was a stupid comment. If someone asked me to heal them, and I had the power to do so, I would. However, Black points out that the man doesn't ask to be healed but rather to be labeled "clean." This would allow him to return to his family and the rest of the community as a full member again. Black writes, "The disease itself is not so bad, but the social ostracism that results from being perceived as a threat to the purity of the community is unbearable."

At the risk of sounding simplistic, I'd like to take a moment and consider our own purity codes. Black calls them "those unwritten religious and societal rules that identify those who are within the accepted boundaries and those who are outside."

Do we here at Circle of Mercy have purity codes? I think we do. Now, it could be argued that people are drawn to certain churches that reflect their wants, needs, and personalities, and not everyone will be drawn to the Circle, and this is as it should be. But I still think we have certain codes that we need to recognize and change, if necessary.

A few months back, a group of folks from the Circle met to talk about how we feel separated or excluded from the Circle. Some of the folks at that meeting have stopped attending, while others simply had some concerns but have stayed regular members. We had three wonderful meetings where thoughts and concerns were shared freely. Mahan attended one as moderator of the congregation, and activities at our recent daylong congregational retreat were planned to address some of the concerns that were raised.

Something came out of that meeting that I think outlines one of our purity codes. To be a member of COM means to have a good education with at least one college degree, preferably two. It also means working in a job where a good education is expected. Some people shared their concern that they felt unimportant and not respected because they didn't have this sort of job or education. They were able to share specific examples where this occurred.

The Circle does draw well-educated people who work in jobs that directly support the stated mission of the church. As a reminder, let me read you our mission statement: "We are followers of Jesus who believe that doing justice and loving mercy are intimately tied to walking humbly with God. Our mission is to nurture spiritual formation in ways that support prophetic and redemptive work in the world."

Yet others of us work in jobs that don't directly support this mission statement—jobs that "just pay the bills"—or we don't work at all. At that meeting, I learned that sometimes folks falling into these categories don't feel connected to our community. I'm sort of in both groups. I used to work as a pastor, but I'm no longer able to do so. As a result, sometimes I feel really separated from the rest of the congregation.

But the truth is, for some reason, we are all drawn to this community. "We are followers of Jesus who believe that doing justice and loving mercy are intimately tied to walking humbly with God." Perhaps we should take the time to get to know folks who are different from ourselves. When we see someone throughout our day who attends the Circle, let's greet him or her just as we would here. Let's support each other as we find ways to be redemptive forces in our world.

Another purity code we have concerns gay and lesbian people. We believe that anyone who is gay or lesbian has an equal share in the reign of God. Scripture does not condemn homosexuality, and neither do we. However, not everyone believes this. Folks who are strongly anti-gay would not be drawn to the Circle, but it is possible that people who haven't studied the scriptural passages that seem to condemn homosexuality or know any openly gay folks may be unsure what to believe.

The Presbyterian Church USA, the denomination in which I was ordained, is trying to change its Constitution to take out a statement that anyone ordained must be in a marriage between a man and a woman, or must be chaste in singleness. This is the fourth time we've tried to change this passage. I get so angry when I hear arguments in response about how homosexuality is wrong. The people who offer these statements are often very hateful. My gut tenses up, and it's hard for me to be calm.

The Covenant Network is a group of Presbyterians trying to take this passage out of the Constitution. The chapter in Asheville met before the Presbytery of Western North Carolina's meeting on January 31st to amend this portion of the Constitution. To my shock, the amendment passed here. We were the first presbytery in the nation that opposed the change at a prior meeting to vote differently this time.

At our last meeting before the vote, we had a bit of a discussion about how mean folks can be who want to keep the passage in. One woman said, "I always try to remember that fear is keeping them from seeing the truth." I always knew this, but for some reason, it hadn't clicked before. So when the meeting came, I was able to control my gut when someone spoke who wanted to keep the passage in.

Presbyterian minister and social activist William Sloane Coffin has said, "Compassion and justice are companions, not choices." I felt compassion that day. The folks who want to keep condemning gays and lesbians are afraid. Their fear comes out as anger.

We in the Circle need to feel compassion for folks who just aren't sure yet. It doesn't mean we stop talking about how our society and church treat folks who are gay. It may mean we can't be around someone who is opposed to homosexuality, but this is why we have the body of Christ. Others can show compassion when we're not able to.

Many of you know that at the end of last year, my next-door neighbor Jules committed suicide. Jules wasn't well liked on our street. She had deep convictions, and she dared to live according to those convictions. She never pushed her views on anyone else, but she didn't get to know many folks in our neighborhood, and many didn't take the time to get to know her.

When I first met her, she chose not to own a car for environmental reasons. She took the bus or rode her bike everywhere. She had an organic garden in her front yard. For a while she lived at Earth Haven farm and rented out her house. She had dreamed about living somewhere she could have a huge vegetable garden. She didn't buy useless junk, and when she died her home was very austere.

At the end of last year, she showed up at our door at two o'clock in the morning two nights in a row. She kept saying she couldn't breathe or sleep. She agreed to spend the night on our sofa, but on both nights she left after only ten minutes. On December 28th she told Michael she was going to drive to see her parents in Florida. She left on that day, and I hoped she finally would be somewhere she could relax.

However, exactly one day later, I saw her truck in the driveway again. I figured something was wrong and I called her, but she wouldn't answer the phone. I knocked on her door, but again she wouldn't answer. After a couple of days, her parents in Florida were worried about her, so they called the police here and asked them to do a wellness check. Again, no answer.

After much deliberation between a police officer, members of the fire department and the rescue squad, they decided to break in through a window. They found Jules overdosed on over-the-counter medication, lying dead in the living room.

The homeless women who are part of the Room in the Inn program were staying at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church that night, and I planned to do a communion service for them about two hours after Jules was found. I had written the service earlier, and it seemed true at the time. But just then it seemed like a lie. I had written, "God knows all about your fears, addictions, and concerns. God will give you strength, courage, and comfort to face every single one of them."

God hadn't given Jules strength and comfort to face her challenges. How could I preach that if I no longer believed it? But I decided the women didn't need to hear about my own doubts at that time. So I preached those words, even as I wondered about them myself.

I've since reread a couple of sermons on death, as well as Harold Kushner's popular book *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. I've come to the conclusion that no one, not even God, could have

prevented Jules' actions. I wish God had hid Jules' car keys so she never would have left Florida. I wish God had jammed the caps on the pill bottles, making it impossible for her to overdose. I wish God had pushed her over to our house where she'd be safe, slamming the door behind her. But God is not some cosmic puppeteer commanding our every move.

I don't know why loved ones die, we lose our jobs, or we have to move somewhere we don't want to go. I don't know why we are traumatic brain injury survivors, we get sick, or we lose our investments in this economy.

God does not cause things to happen to us so we can learn from them. Rather, God takes the things that happen to us and uses them creatively to make us stronger, wiser, or more loving.

But I do know, God is with us in our pain. God does not cause things to happen to us so we can learn from them. Rather, God takes the things that happen to us and uses them creatively to make us stronger, wiser, or more loving. And we are called to support and be with each other in our pain, so we never have to face these challenges alone.

Our neighborhood held a memorial service for Jules right on her front lawn. The day was cold, and snow flurries began to fall in the midst of the service. Thirty or forty people gathered in a circle around a fire pit made out of the insert of an old washer that Jules had used for campfires. We told stories about her and shared our memories.

I thought then about how important it is to have a community. Even though she was outside the unwritten societal rules of our neighborhood, a group of us were drawn to Jules. Some of us are organic gardeners as she was, some crocheted with her, others played in her drumming group, still others worked at the Haywood Road co-op where she worked. At that moment, we were all Jules' community.

And we here at Circle of Mercy are a community. Many of you called me, sent cards, or spoke to me when you heard of Jules' death. I felt supported as I tried to be a friend of Jules, someone who lived her life in the prophetic way that Christ lived, even if others didn't understand.

Here in the Circle, many of us have two or more degrees from colleges, while others have none. A few of us are gay or lesbian; others are straight. Many of us struggle to find ways to live out our mission statement. Yet all of us are followers of Jesus who support and search for God together.

I want to conclude with another quotation from William Sloan Coffin. "Am I my brother's keeper? No, I am my brother's brother or sister. Human unity is not something we are called upon to create, only to recognize."

Though we are different, let us recognize that each of us is part of this body of Christ.
Amen.