

Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.*

Full Participation - February 14, 2021

Mark 1:40-45

Children's books fascinate me. I read a lot as a kid. My mother was an elementary school teacher so she was always buying me books. Of course, since she knew the school curriculum backwards and forwards, she knew what books were on the reading list for my first few years of school. Needless to say, I had read them all before we actually studied them in class.

Because I now work part-time in an elementary school, I get to work with the students helping them read and interpret all kinds of children's literature. Most of what we read was written in the past ten years or so. However, there are still many of my favorites going strong. Dr. Seuss is still very popular. One of my colleagues just finished reading C.S. Lewis' The Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe. That book is a thinly disguised allegory of Christianity.

But the book I want to talk about today is Shel Silverstein's The Giving Tree. Written in 1964, it is the story of the relationship between a man and a tree, tracing it from the man's childhood to his old age.

The story opens with the boy playing in the tree, climbing its branches, enjoying its shade. The boy carves a heart in the tree. "Me and Tree," it says. The tree was very happy to be friends with the boy and glad to offer its branches and shade. But time goes by and things change. The boy stops visiting the tree except occasionally. And then, it is not so much to enjoy the tree, but to get something from the tree. The boy, now teen, carves a new heart into the tree, this time with his name and the initials of a girlfriend. The tree keeps being happy. Later, the boy will get apples from the tree to sell, chop branches from the tree to build a house, and eventually chop the tree down to use its wood to build a boat. Each time, the tree was happy it could be there for the boy. Finally, the boy, now an old man, returns to the tree one last time. The tree, of course, is just a stump and the tree is sad because it can do nothing for the boy/old man. But all the old man wants from the tree is a place to sit down and rest and once again, the tree is happy.

The tree saw its sole purpose as giving, and giving, and giving more. The tree literally gave everything it had and the boy literally took everything the tree had to offer.

Over the years, many pastors have used the story of The Giving Tree as an allegory about Jesus. As Christians, we believe Jesus walked this earth totally giving of himself, giving his teachings about love, giving his healings of the body and spirit, giving his voice to challenge the rulers of his

day, and ultimately giving his life for our sake. In short, the giving tree was like Christ, giving without counting the cost.

At the same time, the boy can be said to represent humanity — a callous, taking humanity that knows nothing of love, but only of greed. Combine the ceaseless, loving by the tree with the endless taking of the boy/humanity and one may ask rightly is this relationship, this all-giving all-taking relationship between the tree and the boy a good, healthy relationship? Is the tree really a model of Jesus? Are we, as followers of Jesus, expected to spend our time on earth giving and giving and giving some more until we are absolutely exhausted? Are we supposed to give without counting the cost and allow ourselves to be used by a ruthless, uncaring humanity?

Well, that's one interpretation. But as today's scripture demonstrates, it's not how Jesus understood his purpose of giving to the world. There are at least two kinds of giving. What the tree did was giving purely for the sake of giving. The tree gave and gave and it was only happy when it was giving.

Now I am sure that Jesus was happy to give of himself. He was glad to teach, preach, heal, and challenge authority. But if that is all Jesus did, I'm not sure that his example of giving would be something we should follow.

In today's scripture, Jesus heals a leper. Quite frankly, your first reaction to hearing this story might well be, "So what?" Jesus does a lot of healing in his ministry. What's so special about this one?

Something we need to remember about the gospel record of Jesus' ministry is that, as John's gospel so eloquently put it, "Jesus did many other things.... If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." In other words, what we have in the gospels is not a day-by-day account of what Jesus did during his earthly ministry. The gospel writers were very selective in both what stories they chose to present to us and even the order in which they were presented.

Sometimes we may think of the gospels as a "biography" of Jesus, but they aren't. Like a biography, the gospels tell us about certain things Jesus said and did, culminating in his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. Unlike biographies, however, the particular teachings we receive and the particular healings we learn about are deliberately selected by the writers to compare and contrast Jesus with the religious practices and ideas at the time. In our time, especially for those of us who grew up in the church, we take so much of Jesus' teaching and healing for granted. However, for nonbelievers back then and nonbelievers even today, Jesus was a very radical and

controversial man. He was constantly challenging people's ideas and expectations of how the world was supposed to work.

Fellow believers, I know you all have friends and family and co-workers who think church is nonsense, Jesus is nonsense, the idea of a personal relationship with God is nonsense. If you ever find yourself in a discussion with these people, I would ask them one question: Have you really read and studied the Bible? Have you really read it? Because if you did, you'd find many of your objections to God and Jesus answered very clearly.

Now I have no doubt that many people are nonbelievers because they look at some of the terrible things that have been done in the name of Christ by the Church and by certain Christian Leaders. The mistake they make is confusing the Church with the Bible. They are not the same. The Bible is constantly challenging the Church, constantly reminding the Church, constantly engaging the Church to examine itself, repent, and change. The very fact that today we are electing our Ruling Elders to serve this congregation is a shining example of how the Bible challenged the Church to change about 500 years ago. Of course, not all branches of the Church listened, but you worship God in a place that did back then and continues to listen and change today.

So all what I have just said is a preface to Jesus' actions in today's scripture. This healing of the leper, far from being just another ho-hum Jesus miracle was an extremely radical and world-changing act which signaled how far Jesus planned to go to change the world.

Let's take the circumstances of this story. A leper comes to Jesus to beg him to make him clean. So what, sick people came to Jesus all the time. But friends, this act itself was incredible. Back then, lepers did not approach people at all! They were forbidden to have anything to do with anyone except other lepers. Now we don't know what disease this man had. The term leprosy was used to describe all kinds of skin diseases. Even houses could get leprosy. All we know is this man had an illness which forbade him to have anything to do with healthy people. Yet, the man broke the law and knelt before Jesus. One rule broken.

Now Jesus should have run away from the man and put himself in quarantine. He might have been exposed — just like all of us who have had to self-quarantine in the Covid era. But Jesus did not run away. Instead, he was "moved with pity" for the man. Other translations say Jesus was angry, not at the man, but at the system that forced human beings to separate themselves from others, dividing people into categories: clean and unclean.

For Jesus, healing the leper was an act of rebellion. He broke the law just by being with this man. He broke it again by healing this man, because he was not officially a priest. With his action, Jesus was declaring that in God's eyes, all people are equal and no one should be separated from others for any reason.

It is no coincidence that Mark puts this story right at the beginning of his gospel, because this story sets the tone for everything that will happen later. One of Jesus' first actions was to heal a leper, making the unclean clean again. In the process, he did another controversial thing: he made himself unclean! The law said that if you have contact with a leper, you had to self-quarantine for a number of days. Jesus did no such thing. Instead he continued with his ministry. And the most amazing thing is that the man he cured went around telling everybody that Jesus cured him. So everybody knew the Jesus had exposed himself to leprosy. But the miraculous thing is that people knew Jesus was unclean but they came to see him anyway!

Surely this is the real good news! God in Jesus Christ came into the world to drive out all the foolish assumptions we have about each other — assumptions that are tearing us apart. Friends, just look at what is going on in the world! Look at all the hatred and division! Look at how hard we are working to separate ourselves from each other. We separate ourselves on so many levels and in so many ways. Race and nationality and language, and sexual orientation, and wealth and political views and I can go on and on and on.

How much trouble? How much misery? How much pain have we brought upon ourselves and each other because of these hurtful, sinful, acts and attitudes of separation? My friends, our modern society has become experts in making lepers out of anyone we happen to disagree with. Democrats are lepers to Republicans. Asians are lepers to whites. The LGBTQ community are lepers to supposedly "straight" people. Not all, of course, but enough division is happening in the world so we might be looking at a future where everybody hates and fears everybody else.

Jesus made it clear from the start that he is not about division, he is about unity. He is about love. Like the Giving Tree, he gave totally of himself. Like the Giving Tree, he risked his own body to help others. He risked his own reputation to help others.

But unlike the Giving Tree, Jesus did what he did not just for the sake of one person, but to change the world for better. Jesus gave and gave and gave of himself. He concluded his earthly ministry by giving his life for us on the cross.

The Giving Tree sacrificed itself for the sake of one. Jesus constantly gave of himself for the sake of all. Both the Giving Tree and Jesus fully participated in the world instead of hiding from it.

Our path lies somewhere in between: sometimes giving ourselves for the sake of one but sometimes daring to give ourselves for the sake of all. But always, always Fully Participating in the world by using our gifts and talents for the sake of life.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.