

“Magic or Mystic?”

2 Kings 5: 1-14, Mark 1: 40-45

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany/B, February 12, 2012

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You think you can tell a lot about a person from their skin. I am not sure that is always true. I can tell you, I have a new appreciation for skin. I am amazed at its healing and rejuvenation properties. I have been dating a man named Rick, for several years. During Hurricane Irene in August, he suffered a serious accident at work. He broke his lower right leg and suffered significant muscle and nerve damage as well. In order to relieve the pressure and ensure proper healing he had several surgeries. I thank God for the invention of the wound vac! I won't go into details here, but I am very grateful. Finally, in order to close the wound he had a skin graft. While I have watched the skin heal slowly over the past six months, I don't believe the skin will ever completely erase the scar of this accident.

Skin is in many ways the toughest organ of the human body, the primary line of defense, seemingly capable of renewing itself almost endlessly following cuts, bruises, even surgery and skin grafting. In every case the skin may leave behind evidence of injury, but even when there is disfigurement, healing is possible. I think of J.R. Martinez, the Iraq war veteran who won “Dancing with the Stars.” Even though his face had been visibly scarred in the war, he was beautiful, exuding a warmth and love of life that endeared him to the audience. I think of Chaz Bono, the son of Sonny and Cher, who competed alongside J. R. Chaz recently transitioned to being a man after growing up as Chastity Bono. Finally, he is “comfortable in his own skin”; able to be who he believes he was created to be despite the chromosomal confusion.

We judge what is and is not beautiful by the markings on one's skin, or the number of wrinkles or its color. The hue of one's skin, how light or dark you are, often dictates who is acceptable and who is not. My daughter reminded me the other day that when she travelled to the Dominican Republic last summer as part of the mission with Arm 2 Arm, the Haitian refugees with whom they worked were often discriminated against, not only because they were essentially undocumented foreigners in the Dominican Republic, but because their skin was darker. For many years, when racial discrimination was its worst, fair skinned black people would try to “pass” as whites in order to avoid discrimination. One writer remarks, “even healthy skins of different colors have been responsible for division and hatred between tribes, peoples, and racial groups, probably more than any other feature of the human anatomy. White skin, olive skin, red skin, black skin, yellow skin, combinations of those skin types, all these have been known to provide rationales for walls of enmity and hatred.”

We see this hatred exhibited in the healing story from Mark's gospel. It is not the color of the man's skin that draws enmity, but the disease that affects his skin. The story of Jesus healing the leper is the third in a series of healing stories. Much to Jesus' frustration, he has become known as the traveling healer and little else. He sent the demon packing in the synagogue and the crowds grew. The people followed him to

Simon's mother in law's house where he healed her and Jesus could hardly get to his next destination. Now wherever Jesus goes, the people come expecting to be healed. Jesus has much to preach and teach, but he keeps getting interrupted. He tries to preach in Galilee and a leper asks to be healed. In each healing incident there is more happening than meets the eye.

The social taboos for lepers in Israel were all encompassing. No leper under any circumstances was to approach a non-leper. Any time a person that was clean came near a leper, he or she needed to shout in a loud voice, "Unclean! Unclean!" You can imagine what this must have done to a person's self esteem. Leprosy in this culture was dreaded not only for its disfiguring misery, but because it made you a complete social outcast. You were forbidden to participate in the religious life of the community. Rabbis were known to have commented on the status of lepers, calling them living corpses whose cure was as difficult as resurrection of the dead.<sup>1</sup>

The leper approaches Jesus and sheepishly solicits his healing. He says to Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean." The leper believes he to be unworthy of healing, but asks anyway. He knows Jesus is capable, but is not certain he would bother to waste his power on someone like him. We learn from this healing story and from the story of Namann's healing that healing is only possible when we are partners with God. It is our willingness that makes the healing possible.

Jesus chooses to heal this man; however, he does not offer him some magic potion. If this man had not taken the risk to approach Jesus and place himself before him to receive his healing touch, nothing would have happened. Jesus does not pick him out of a crowd. In fact, Jesus was hoping that for one day, he would come to Galilee and do something besides heal the masses of people who approached him. Despite his own frustration, Jesus never turns away someone who is in pain nor does he refuse to do what he can to bring someone back into full participation in the community.

This man suffered from a skin disease that frightened people. A leper was ostracized because his disease was contagious and a threat to the health of his neighbors. We do not need skin lesions to create barriers within our communities. Jesus heals more than this man with leprosy. He transforms the system that keeps people off limits based on disease or the language you speak or the amount of money you make or the gender of the person you choose to love. Our ability to exclude and separate goes beyond the condition of one's skin. Jesus came to heal the next toughest organ in the human body, the heart.

As you hear this story of Jesus healing the leper, what four words might you use to describe Jesus? There is no right or wrong answer. Take a moment to think about that. (pause) The writer David Lose comments on the four words he thinks best describes Jesus. They fit not only the way Jesus acts in this story, but most of Jesus' ministry. The words that come to mind are: compassion, touch, willing and lonely. When Jesus sees this man he is moved to compassion. He does not judge him, he does not assume, as

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Elder, "Skin Game," Sermons on the Gospel Reading Series III, Cycle B, excerpt on SermonSuite.com, February 12, 2012.

many in the culture did, that this man's leprosy was a form of punishment for bad behavior, he puts no conditions on his healing other than to go to the priests to verify what has happened. Jesus simply reaches out to touch this man, knowing the consequences to his own ministry in doing so. This is the way we experience God as well: not primarily as judgmental, or directive, or demanding, but compassionate.

In order to heal this man Jesus needs to touch him. This was something no one else was willing to do. There is an intimacy to touch that we can not take for granted. David Lose says, "ask the elderly, the ill, the depressed, or the isolated just how rare and beautiful human touch is and you may be surprised (or maybe just reminded) that there are few gestures as profound, loving, and healing as human touch." I see this whenever people come to receive the laying on of hands during a healing service. The one who sits in the chair is touched by everyone there and you can feel the energy flow to them from each set of hands. Unlike Elisha who does not even come out to meet Namaan, but sends him to bathe in the river, Jesus reaches out and touches this man. Jesus reminds us that God does not just prescribe methods to bring about healing, but longs to be in relationship with us, by taking on the form of human flesh, living as we live, in order to reach out and touch us in love.

In touching this man, Jesus affirms that he is worthy, that he still has value and dignity, something that has been stripped away like the layers of unhealthy skin. In many ways this man may have been like a living corpse, as the Rabbis assumed, only Jesus knows how to bring this man back to life. In giving him back his life and restoring him to the community, Jesus relinquishes a portion of his own life. With each subsequent healing Jesus gives up a piece of his own freedom. He is no longer able to go anywhere without drawing a crowd. His life is no longer his own, the plan he had for his ministry keeps shifting. Nevertheless, Jesus never turns anyone away.

The final word is lonely. Suffering in silence from a disease that keeps you isolated from others can be lonely. Jesus is beginning to see that doing God's work can be lonely. Setting the example for others to follow can be lonely. Speaking a prophetic word when no one seems willing to listen can be lonely. Coming to change the world, to break open oppressive social and religious systems can be lonely. Knowing what needs to be done even when it will ultimately lead to your death can be lonely. Even though hundreds of people are clamoring for Jesus' attention, he still feels lonely. Loneliness is a very human emotion. We have all felt lonely at some time in our lives. The same was true for Jesus. With every new interaction, every new healing, every new challenge to the authorities Jesus paid a price. Love always costs something. Acting compassionately and doing the right thing comes at a price. In this case, Jesus' attention to this leper costs him a little more of his freedom. He was always willing to take the risk and pay the price no matter how high it may be. Justice and compassion and love come at a cost. As followers of Jesus, we may be called upon to pay that price as well.

In this healing story we get a glimpse of what God is like. God came to dwell among us, to show mercy and compassion to those who are marginalized and forgotten. God came to reach out to each of us in love, affirming our worth and dignity, no matter what

element of dis-ease keeps us from full relationship with each other and God. God is eager and willing to embrace us in healing, forgiveness, and grace, and eagerly embraces the pain and dysfunction of the world out of love for us, and the whole world in which we live. Having been healed we return to the community to do the same. It is what we do. It is not magic or even miraculous, it is the essence of love! Amen

Sources:

Robert J. Elder, "Skin Game," from Sermons of the Gospel Readings Series III, Cycle B, on Sermonsuite.com, February 12, 2012.

David Lose, "Four Words," WorkingPreacher.org, February 12, 2012.