

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
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Mark1:40-45

“I do choose.”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

In ancient times, lepers were complete outcasts.

Because the disease was disfiguring, frightening and contagious, the sufferers were totally marginalized in society. Lepers who were not banished to a remote leper colony were reduced to begging for food and coins because they were not allowed to work in any form of employment. Lepers were not permitted to interact with the healthy population or to worship with the community. They were cast out of community, home, and family.

In ancient times, the leper was a person as good as dead.

The term “leper” itself tells most of the story...

those suffering from leprosy were labeled by their disease and their disease alone. They were lepers.

Last Sunday I preached on the story of Simon’s mother-in-law who had a fever (Mark 1:30). She may not have been given a name, but at least she is Simon’s mother-in-law. She is not referred to as “the fevered.”

Also in the Bible (Luke 8:43) we encounter the woman who hemorrhaged for twelve years and touched the fringe of Jesus’ clothes to be healed. She also does not have a name but at least she is not referred to as “the hemorrhaged.”

And there is the man with a withered hand (Luke 6:6). Jesus touches and heals him on the Sabbath. He does not have a name but at least he is not referred to as “the withered.”

But for those suffering from or living with leprosy, it was a different story.

They were never referred to as “the man or the woman with leprosy.”

They were always simply “the leper.” They were defined only and completely by their disease. They were outcasts even among the outcast.

And so we find with surprise (or are we surprised?) that in today's passage from the Book of Mark Jesus heals a man with leprosy.

And Jesus does not just heal him with a blessing or a wave of his hand, Jesus touches the man with leprosy.

And Jesus does not just touch the man with leprosy casually or in passing, Jesus announces to the man with leprosy AND the surround crowd that this is something he chooses to do.

Listen again to the passage:

*A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him,
"If you choose, you can make me clean."
Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hands and touched him,
and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!"
Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.
Mark 1:40-42*

I do choose, Jesus told the man and those around him. I do choose.

Jesus is telling the man with leprosy and his followers and anyone who can hear his words: no one is beyond my reach.

I can and I will reach across social, cultural and even medical norms and conventions and touch those on the margins, those who are outcast, those others avoid. No one is beyond my reach.

I will touch the untouchables, Jesus is saying. And he means it both literally and metaphorically.

I will touch the untouchables.

I choose to touch the untouchables.

And that is the standard I set for you,
the expectation I have for you,
and the model I leave with you.

Jesus chose to touch the untouchables of his time.

And so my question for us today is: who are the untouchables of our time?

And are we reaching out to them?

If as Christians, as Christ-followers, we try to model our lives after Jesus' life, he has left us this story and these words as a guide. Jesus touched the untouchables of his time. He chose to touch the untouchables of his time.

No one was beyond his reach.

And so we must ask: who are the untouchables of our time and are we reaching out to them?

Those living with leprosy are not the untouchables of our time due to medical advances and how that disease has been nearly eradicated. And so those living with leprosy are not the marginalized people we encounter in our communities. But the story in Mark has relevance for us today because there are outcasts in our lives and in our midst, untouchables who society regards as outcasts, who we are called to see and to touch.

The untouchables in our time might be:

People with AIDS

Homeless people and street people

Addicts

Poor people

Inmates

Ex-convicts

People with mental illness

And people who are dying

Those folks might be the untouchables of our time.

In our daily routines, in the course of our lives at home, at work, at Church, in the community, shopping at the Mall, going to the movies, traveling, buying groceries we are often able to avoid contact with the untouchables. We move through a world where the untouchables have been excluded—they are removed, institutionalized, kept out of sight. Or the untouchables have learned to “pass” and they move among us hiding their untouchable status as best as they can, they move among us hidden in plain view.

In order for us to interact with the untouchables of our time we must, as Jesus did, consciously choose to

See them

And reach out to them.

We must consciously choose to see them, to find them, to encounter them, AND to be present to and among them. It is a decision, a choice—it takes intention.

And so I pause now and wonder how I am doing with this standard, this expectation that Jesus left with his followers. I pause to reflect on how well I have followed his model of reaching to the margins of society, to touch the

untouchables, to be present to those who society ignores, under-serves, considers disposable and hides away.

I know that there are many individuals in this Church family who have said to themselves I do choose to find and work with these populations.

I know Annie Harrison regularly volunteers at a poor, all Black, inner city school in Springfield. Annie has said: I do choose.

I know Mary Vaughan and Nancy Desrosiers regularly work with homeless men and women at the cot shelter in Northampton providing meals and support. Mary and Nancy have said: I do choose.

I know Jim Palermo, Shirley Warner and Robert Davis regularly visit inmates at the Ludlow Prison and the Hampshire County Jail. Robert, Jim and Shirley have said: I do choose.

I know Mary Sheenan, Carol Rinehart and Annie Culver work with people who are dying. Mary, Carol and Annie have said: I do choose.

I know Kate Davidheiser regularly takes needed supplies to a homeless shelter and a battered women's shelter. Kate has said: I do choose.

I know Susan Farrell has assumed a leadership role in our cross-class work at the church and the wider community. Susan has said: I do choose.

I know the youth in our Church package and mail letters and books to inmates through the Prison Book Project with Toby, cmoore and Til. Our young people with Toby, cmoore and Til have said: I do choose.

These folks and so many of you are giving money and investing time doing the unglamorous and unthanked work of reaching out to the untouchables of today because you feel called, as true Christ-followers, to do this work. Without recognition and without praise because Jesus touched the untouchables of his time, you have modeled your life after his.

I draw great strength from you and I recognize that we are a community. A strong, working, healthy community. And as a community each one of us need not reach out to every untouchable of our time. Each one of us is not required to work with

people with AIDS and homeless men and inmates and people with mental illness....each one of us is called to do a part, our part.

Because we are part of the body of Christ, part of a community, we know that if Annie does her part, and Jim his and Kate hers and Mary hers and Nancy hers and I do mine, we are doing God's work as a whole, as a group—we are a Church family doing the work we are called to do, sharing the load we are called to carry, being the Christ-followers we are called to be.

Paul wrote about this aspect of community in his letter to the Church in Corinth so many years ago.

Listen to his words found in 1 Corinthians 12....

*For just as the body is one and has many members,
and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.
...the body does not consist of one member but of many.
If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,"
that would not make it any less a part of the body.
And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I don't belong to the body,"
that would not make it any less a part of the body.
As it is, there are many members, yet one body.*

We are many members that together comprise one body.

And so if I do my part touching untouchables of our time, and you do your part touching untouchables of our time—just as the eye does its part, and the foot does its part—we make up a whole, a community, a body that is living the lessons Jesus gave to us to follow.

By touching the man with leprosy

and not just touching the man but announcing that he was choosing to touch the man with leprosy, Jesus was saying

I see you—you who have been tucked away, shipped off, deprived and ignored—
I see you.

And I choose to touch you—you labeled untouchable by your family and community—

I reach for you.

By touching the man with leprosy

Jesus was saying there are no untouchables.

There is no one that cannot be reached.

There are no outcasts.

Jesus is telling us:

I choose to draw a larger and larger circle;

I choose to include those ostracized, excluded, invisible, and considered untouchable;

I choose to reach to the outcasts of the outcast.

I do choose, Jesus said to the man with leprosy.

I do choose. And I choose you.

No one is beyond Jesus' reach.

No one is over-looked or unimportant.

No one is untouchable in Jesus' eye.

And as his followers, we live our lives reaching across barriers that often separate us from our brothers and sisters...

We remember and embrace the three simple words Jesus said to the man living with leprosy...

I do choose.

I do choose...

to see you

and to touch you.

Amen.