

the beautiful anger of Jesus

Good morning. If you are just joining us today, we are six-weeks into a deep study in the Gospel of Mark – on **the gospel of Jesus**. A study we're calling: **Into the Life of Jesus**. As a way of naming the goal of our series – the goal of the gospel – that **we** would – **everyone of us** – come to not just **understand** Jesus and the gospel, but come to be **drawn into the life of Jesus!**

This, according to Mark's gospel, is what the Gospel is all about – not just **getting to heaven**, but **getting to God... getting in on the life of God** – on earth as it is in heaven – in and through Jesus.

This is what we see happening at every turn in the gospel of Mark. This is what Jesus is up to in every scene in this gospel...

And **He does it again** in our text today – so, if you have a bible, open it with me to **Mark 1:40-45**. And I'll read it for us.

Mark 1:40-45

A man with leprosy came to [Jesus] and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.

Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." **Instead** he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. **As a result**, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

Let me just read the opening verses of this once **again for us (this time** from the translation known as The Message – just to help us hear it a bit differently).

Mark 1:40-41

A leper came to Jesus, begging on his knees, "If you want to, you can cleanse me."

Deeply moved, Jesus put out his hand, touched him, and said, "I want to. Be clean." Then and there the leprosy was gone, his skin smooth and healthy...

If you want to, you can cleanse me.

If you are willing, you can make me clean... make me whole...

Let's be honest, that's a prayer we've all prayed.

In truth, it's probably what the **majority** of our petitions – in prayer – sound like...

"God, I know you can _____ (you fill in the blank) – heal, restore, rescue, provide – me – or someone else (whomever it is we are praying for...).

I know you can.

→ *So will you?" Will you?*

"If you are willing, you can make me clean."

This is a significant moment in Mark's revelation of Jesus and his gospel.

So far in Mark's gospel – specifically, in the last few scenes – we have been invited to see and celebrate **the Authority of Jesus** – or rather, *the Authority of God on display in Jesus.*

Jesus has **taught** with authority, and with just a word of rebuke, he has **cast out** a demonic spirit. And then in the face of a dire illness, Jesus simply **offered His hand** and a sick woman was restored to full health.

In the early chapters of Mark’s gospel, **the authority of Jesus is on display at every turn.**

But here in this story, we are invited to consider not only the authority, or power, of Jesus – but **the will – the Heart – of Jesus...**

Or more precisely, *the Will or Heart of God – on display in Jesus...*

The Will – the Want-to – of God.

Which, as the man in this account knew well, **is everything.**

Because, as he says simply and honestly, **“If you are willing... If you want to, you can make me clean...”**

We might not use the same words, but I suspect most of us live with a similar framework, conviction and logic when we think of or approach God...

We’re pretty sure **God can do anything.** This, as far as we can understand, is **the logic of God.** This is essential to ***what it means to be God.***

God can do anything God wants.

And so, when it comes to the critical moments and prayers of our lives, most of us don’t wrestle with uncertainty about what God **can** do. Our wrestling – our uncertainty – is in what God **will** do... What God **wants** to do...

Because God can do anything He wants.

All that to say: there is something so familiar about this prayer – this petition we hear from the heart and lips of this man with leprosy. We may not know what it's like to live as a leper, but we know what it's like to pray this prayer – **to wonder if God is willing...**

And so, on that note, **let's stop and pray.**

Now before we rush to hear what Jesus says in response, we need to **slow down** and **get inside this story** – because, as always, there is far more going on than we might expect or realize – **and it all factors into** what is ultimately revealed about Jesus and the gospel.

And the first clue to this deeper story emerges from this repeated reference, not to healing, but to being **cleansed**.

*"If you are willing, you can make me **clean**."*

We might expect this man to ask Jesus to **heal** him – but he doesn't. He asks to be **made clean**.

Because leprosy, in Jesus' day, meant **far more** than being ravaged by a wasting disease – as horrible as that is.

Deeper than this, it meant being **unclean** – ritually unclean – and because of this, the leper – this man – was **utterly banished** from the life and care of the community – from the social and worshipping life of his community.

Not that the physical reality of leprosy wasn't (and isn't), *in and of itself, horrific*. It was and is. But deeper than this, leprosy meant **being cast out** – banished from fellowship with others, forced to dwell outside the camp.

As historians explain, in Jesus' day, it was *illegal* for someone with leprosy to approach someone who was ritually **clean**.

The unclean were required, by law, to not come within **50 paces**.

Which is why, in **Luke 17:12**, we read of a group of lepers coming to Jesus, but “**standing at a distance**” – crying out for his mercy. Because this is what the law required – and everyone knew it.

Because if they **came close**, and especially, if they came into **contact** with someone – *that person* would become **unclean**. Not leprous per se, but **ritually unclean** – unable to participate in social and worshipping life *until they underwent a complicated series of purification rites*.

Not surprisingly, those with leprosy were **ruthlessly avoided**.

And on top of all this, in Jesus' day, many believed and taught that leprosy was **God's punishment** for sin. It is not what scripture taught, but it is what many believed.

In other words, **this was God's will** for the leper – because of something they'd done, or what their parents had done...

Imagine what all that does to a person – to their view of God and themselves?

It's no wonder that Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, in the decades following Jesus, wrote of leprosy as **a living death-sentence – a walking corpse**.

And so, with this in mind, we turn to Mark 1:40 and are told,

"A man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'"

I'm trust by now we can understand the dramatic implications of this **seemingly innocuous** act.

This man – in coming to Jesus – has broken the law!

He has risked everything in this moment – in this act!

I've been racking my mind to think of **a parallel** that would help us understand the **recklessness** of this action – and the only thing I can think of is to imagine a row of Jews in a Nazi concentration camp, standing in line for yet another day's humiliating inspection, and as Adolf Hitler, the Fuhrer himself, walks by, one of the Jewish prisoners lunges forward and throws himself at Hitler's feet and cries out desperately, "If you are willing, you can set me free!"

As I'm sure you can imagine, every rifle in the camp would be up and on this pitiful soul – just waiting for the Fuhrer's command.

Not that Jesus was or is anything like Adolf Hitler, but, for a leper to come near like this, every social and religious rifle in sight would have been up and on this desperate soul – waiting for Jesus’ command.

Waiting for the response of the man whom the **demons** had, just the day before, addressed as “**the Holy One of God**” (Mark 1:24).

If there ever was a man truly clean – it was Jesus.

The Man this unclean man has just come near to... Close enough to touch...
Close enough to render Jesus unclean...

And what does Jesus do? What is His response?

“If you are willing, you can make me clean!”

Verse 41 tells us – **“Jesus was indignant.”**

Indignant? **Really?**

What happened to the kind and gracious Jesus we’re used to?

We’d expect Hitler to be **indignant – angry? But Jesus?**

How are we to make sense of this?

Now, many of our translations read differently here – in ways that might seem to resolve this for us..

The ESV says, “**Moved with** compassion.” And another has, “**Filled with pity**”.

Which is what we’d expect from Jesus.

Still, we’re left confused. **Why these seemingly opposing translations?**

But as the footnote in some of our Bible’s explain, this isn’t actually a **translation** issue, but a difference in the **ancient manuscripts**.

Different ancient manuscripts give us **completely different** Greek words here.

So which is it?

Well, I can’t say unequivocally, but there is a **basic principle in textual criticism** (when assessing historical documents) that invites one to ask: which word would ancient scribes more likely replace with the other? And from all we know of Jesus, the obvious answer is that scribes would more likely choose “compassion” over “indignation” or anger. Which means then, at least according to basic principles of textual criticism, “**indignation**” is likely the original word – as uncomfortable as it seems.

So again, “Jesus was **indignant!**”

How are we to make sense of this? We don’t use this word much these days – but it means to be *provoked to anger, resentment, outrage!*

In response to this man with leprosy coming near and begging, “*If you are willing, you can make me clean!*” – we’re told, Jesus was **indignant! Angry! Outraged!?**

It doesn’t make sense – especially in the light of what he does and says next.

Unless... Unless his anger and indignation isn’t directed at the man – the leper – but *at all the misery this man has had to suffer as a leper...* At all the ways this has

crushed his soul, wasted his body, alienated him from others, and likely made him hate himself, convinced that God hates him...

Fully aware of God’s good and perfect will for all of creation, **Jesus was indignant at how the curse (the consequence of the fall) had ravaged creation** – and so deeply in the experience of this man...

An experience that likely *led this man to believe* – deep in his soul – that though Jesus, for all of His authority, may **want** – be **willing** – be **glad**, even – to rescue and restore **others**, he was unlikely to **WANT** to restore him...

But what did he have to lose? He was already living a death-sentence...

I can understand why Mark says, “Jesus was **indignant!**”

But even if the translators of the NIV (and I, along with them) are wrong, **either word** invites us to see that Jesus – and in Him, GOD – was moved, affected deeply by this man’s plight...

And we need to take this to heart.

Sometimes I’m sure we all think, believe, harbour a deep soul-suspicion, that **God is oblivious to our suffering**. And that if God even knows it, He is surely **unaffected** – **unmoved** – by what shakes and disturbs us.

How could GOD be moved by us? It doesn’t seem logically possible – with all that is going on around the globe in this very moment – along with all that ever has and ever will go on...

And yet **here** in this moment, in time, this man's suffering and beleaguered faith **moved Jesus**... whether with compassion, or pity, or anger and indignation – in Jesus we are invited to consider that **God (what philosophers call the Unmoved Mover) is moved by us... by you... by me...** by the suffering that afflicts our lives and torments our souls.

As the sermon title in the bulletin says: *Sometimes the anger of Jesus is a beautiful thing!*

Because it tells us that GOD – the Unmoved Mover – is Moved by us!

And in this anger, this indignation, or compassion and pity – **Jesus does the unimaginable. Before He speaks, He does the one thing *no one expected*.**

"He reached out his hand and touched him."

He reached out his hand and touched the unclean man.

Jesus does not need to do this!

As the previous stories already have proven, Jesus can restore someone **with just a word**. He has that kind of authority. He can speak and give life!

He didn't need to do this!

BUT WORSE – as far as everyone present was concerned – **He shouldn't have done this**. Because, according to everyone present, by touching this man, JESUS had become **unclean. contaminated. defiled...**

That's how it worked. As historians explain, according to the religion and customs of Jesus' day, *when clean and unclean touch, the clean thing becomes unclean.*

When clean and unclean touch, the clean thing becomes unclean.

It's just way it worked. It's the way it had **always** worked...

Until this moment...

Until Jesus – the Holy One of God – reached out and touched this unclean man – **and made him clean.**

I wonder if the man himself tried to **pull away** from Jesus? To **dodge** his touch?

Not wanting to make things worse for Jesus. **He didn't need to do this.** It was totally unnecessary – and dangerous even...

And yet, in this moment, in this seemingly **unnecessary** action of Jesus, Jesus reveals something **so necessary.** (And this is the heart of it all!)

Two things actually.

(1) That He is now the Dangerous One!

Up until this moment, this leper was considered the dangerous one – dangerous to **everything** and **everyone** he encountered – **including Jesus.**

His **uncleanness** was *dangerous to everyone.*

But here – in Jesus' touch – Jesus reveals that **He is now truly the Dangerous One** – the One who's influence is truly contagious... infecting... utterly able to overtake and rewrite the story of another.

In Jesus a new power has been loosed in the world – a power able to **make the Unclean Clean.**

And (2) with this **cleansing touch**, Jesus has revealed to this man – and to us – that **God is willing...**

That **GOD is willing** – to make us clean!... **More willing that we are!**

That GOD – *the GOD revealed in Jesus – the GOD on display in Jesus* – doesn't recoil from us – pull away – able, but UNwilling.

But this God IS WILLING... The God revealed in Jesus is a God who comes near – addresses the uncleanness in our hearts and lives – to restore *and make us clean*...

And with this, Jesus says the words the leper – and all of us – long to hear.

He says – "I am willing. Be clean!"

"I am willing."

"Oh God, if you are willing... if you want to, you can cleanse me..."

"I am willing", Jesus says. "I am willing."

So willing that I will become unclean for you.

So willing that I will take your uncleanness upon myself.

So willing that I will be cast out – that you might be made clean and brought near – redeemed, restored and reconciled by God – to God and the community of God's people...

Which is where this story concludes, doesn't it?

Having touched and cleansed this man – Jesus commands him to not tell anyone, but to go immediately to the priest and offer the sacrifices of Moses – as a testimony to them.

To who? "to them" – to the religious leaders and community...

Why? Does Jesus think this is necessary for his cleansing?

No! Jesus has already declared him clean. But *His longing – Jesus' longing – His desire – His heart – His will* for this man is not simply that he would be cleansed of his leprosy, but that he would be **restored fully** to fellowship – embraced **fully**, once again, or like never before, into the full life of his community.

And for this, he needed the priest's certificate.

But sadly, though maybe understandably, **the man did not go to the priest, but** "went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news."

And **"as a result"**, Mark tells us, "Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places."

Do we see the gospel in all this & the costly reversal the gospel brings?

At the outset of the story, we find a man suffering greatly – **cast off** – unclean, dwelling in the lonely places.

Until Jesus reaches out to touch and cleanse him and restore him to community...

And when it's all said and done, *where do we find Jesus?*

We find him on the **outside – cast off – in the lonely place.**

Why? → Because He is willing...

More willing than we could ever imagine...

The Holy One of God who comes to make the unclean clean.

So willing that He reaches out to touch and cleanse the unclean in us.

So willing that He becomes unclean for us.

So willing that He takes our uncleanness upon Himself.

*So willing that He allows Himself to be cast out – that we might be made clean and **brought near** – redeemed, restored and reconciled by God – to God and the community of God's people...*

This is the gospel of Jesus, isn't it? [already, in Mark 1!]

A gospel that God longs for us to hear and know and believe today – that in Jesus, God is willing – and able – to make us clean and to restore us to Himself and the life He has made us for.

Let's pray – and come to the Table of Jesus...