

Wholeness Gone Viral

Sermon 6 | Greystone Baptist Church | February 17, 2019

Luke 5: 12-16

Being in community can be a scary thing... especially during flu season. Each of us has to decide for ourselves how we are going to get through. Will we withdraw for the season? Will we refrain from human contact? Will we wash our hands compulsively? Will we abstain from the passing of the peace?

When I was on staff at The Riverside Church in New York we used to pass around bottles of Purell before we would serve communion. This was how we would minimize the risk of passing germs to one another along with the passing of the bread. Even here at Greystone, in my first few weeks, Allan was gracious enough to offer a friendly "elbow bump" in lieu of shaking hands or embracing as we pass the peace to one another. It's a seasonal remedy that gives us a sense of security around the risky behaviors requested of us when we gather in community.

While these seasonal provisions cannot – with certainty – protect us from one another and the viruses that we may accidentally share, they can certainly help. April frequently tells me stories about "that one Easter when we passed more than the peace" with one another. Story goes that half of you weren't even home before the stomach virus kicked in.

I hate to say it but every time I hear that story, I thank God that I was not yet a part of this beloved community.

In a lot of ways, the flu virus is a great metaphor to help us understand today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. The flu is probably our most feared illness in these winter months. To be fair, it can kill us. If it doesn't do that, it can confine us to the bed for a week, it can isolate us from those we love. On the other hand, flu can be totally treatable. Sure, it takes time, but for most of us, flu is something that time and rest can heal. The hardest part for me is acceptance. One time I had the flu and refused to accept it. I drove myself to Atlanta for a conference I'd registered for and wound up dehydrated and in the emergency room... because I wanted to pretend like it wasn't there. "I HAD MY FLU SHOT!" I stated in protest as the ER nurse read me my positive test results. "But as we all know," she reminded me, "that doesn't make you 100% immune."

We are all vulnerable to the flu and other viruses that threaten our health and wholeness.

When the Gospels were written, there was another sort of flu that had people all kinds of nervous. Its name was Leprosy. I remember learning about it in Sunday School, probably reading these same verses. After reading the verses someone would ask, "Ms. Vera, what's leprosy?" Vera would respond, "It's a skin disease that people used to get back in Jesus' day. It would make your skin look all peely, and itchy, and broken..." "Eeeeeeeeeewwwwww," my classmates would cry out. "But don't worry," Ms. Vera

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would interrupt, "Leprosy doesn't exist anymore." For most of us our horror was pacified only until we aged into high school social studies classes in which we would awaken to the reality that real leprosy does still exist in our world.

Scholars point out that while leprosy was and is a real thing, the story does not only discuss a skin condition so much as it describes a human condition.¹ In the Bible we learn a lot about leprosy, more than most other medical conditions. We learn in the Levitical codes that lepers are unclean and thus excluded for a period of time from participating in the ritual practices of faith. Not only are they excluded from faith practice, but they are also cast out of their communities... until they are made clean.

Leviticus 13:45-46 reads:

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

Of course, the intent of such inhospitable rules and regulations was to preserve the sanctity of the temple. This was the most holy place, marked and maintained as a place to meet with God. Leprosy would ruin all of that. Leprosy was contagious and could easily be shared by contact. Even more so, was the contagion associated with being unclean. Uncleanness could be passed along through touch, but also by sitting on a chair or bed (or pew) that had been used by someone who was unclean. You might begin to understand why communities resorted to isolating and excluding the lepers. Healthy folks didn't want to catch the ancient flu!

Honestly, contracting leprosy is a little more serious than catching the flu. Not because of the medical diagnosis so much as the process of social and religious restoration. When someone contracted leprosy they had to wait for the skin condition to go away, then they went "through an eight-day purification process that included more than one immersion, shaving off all the hair from the body, washing their clothes, and a ceremony with two doves in the house where the leper previously lived."² In short, it's just a little more involved than spraying down the house with Lysol.

It is bad enough that a person with leprosy was uncomfortable and sick, but they were also responsible for keeping the temple healthy and clean. The only way to do that was to stay away. Just like the leper had responsibilities, the city itself would have been expected to participate in the virus prevention efforts. In much the same way as a school might send a sick child home, so as not to infect the other students, the city would have it in their best interest to keep the leper on the outside. "His dwelling shall be outside the camp," we read in Leviticus (Ch. 13).

¹ Richard Vinson. *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Luke*. 2008. p. 136-139.

² *Ibid.*, 137.

Being made clean for the leper meant being welcomed back into community. It was more than physical healing it was social and spiritual... it was more like being made whole.

Curiously both the leper and the city in today's reading from Luke are without name. Now, these could be insignificant omissions. Maybe Luke didn't know the name of the man. Or maybe he couldn't remember which city Jesus was in that day. Or maybe Luke left those details out on purpose. Maybe Luke knew that while this leper and this city had names and identities... this same scenario could (and can) happen in any city, with anybody.

In many ways, the story really comes to life if you take away the name of the skin condition and fill in the blank with the many conditions that function like viruses in our own lives. Words like addiction, pain, depression, grief, loneliness, loss, anxiety, and fear seem to fit quite nicely don't they?

We may not send people to camps outside of town when there is a medical concern, but how often do we self-quarantine because of loss and loneliness?

And how often do we separate ourselves from friends and family who are plagued by depression?

When I think about the church as a body – the body of Christ – I see different kinds of viruses and contagious conditions threatening to break the body apart. I see fear of the unknown, anxiety about the future, grief over changed or lost relationships, pain from hearing hurtful words spoken within the body itself. *This* body is not immune from the contagious diseases that threaten our communion.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus enters the city. He moves from the perimeter, remember he was on the lake in the preceding story. From the outside of the city he moves in toward the center.

The leper also makes his way to the center. Leviticus tells us that he was never supposed to be in the city at all. He was to set up a camp outside of the city, a safeguard for the un-infected citizens, until he was whole again.

I wonder if the leper knew he would never be whole again out there, alone and cut off from society?

Whether or not he knew Jesus would be in the city, he broke the rules and stepped back into community. And the community broke the rules in letting him back in. Notice that Luke says nothing about authorities waiting to remove him from town. Both leper and people vulnerably broke the rules of separation that pretended to protect them from one another.

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Like a virus, fear of rejection and fear of contamination could have kept this man from wholeness. But that isn't what happened on that day.

Instead, Jesus hears his cry for help and stretches out his hand, touching the man, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean."

Jesus risks everything when he reaches out to touch the leper. He risks contracting the disease, he risks becoming ritually unclean. He risks social exclusion, and he risks becoming an outsider just like the man he is trying to welcome back in. Jesus' actions on this day are sort of like a vaccine or antibiotic that interrupt a system that is under attack by sickness. Just like our medicines that touch and interact directly with the bacteria that spread in our bodies when we are sick. That direct interaction is risky, it is vulnerable, but it is necessary to heal us and make us whole again.

The church is called to be the body of Christ in the world. We are called to live and breathe and move through the world in the same way that Jesus lived and breathed and moved through the world two thousand years ago. And we have these ancient stories that serve as guides for us, teaching us about how to be Christ's own body, hands and feet, heart and mind, in this world.

So today as we study this text and think about all the many illnesses and viruses and diseases that threaten God's beloved even in our own neighborhood. I wonder what it would be like for us to be like antibiotics of love, vaccines of forgiveness, immunizations of welcome in a world full of diseases that try to divide our communion and separate us from one another.

What would it be like if the church behaved like the city Jesus was in on that day? A place that would welcome even a leper! A place that would be vulnerable enough to hold within itself an opportunity for healing to occur. I wonder who the church would attract if we had a sign out front that said "I DO CHOOSE" and people could know that it meant we were a place of healing, a place where outcasts and sinners are made whole again... a place where the sick find refuge and the healthy dare to reach out their hands saying, "be made clean."

What would it be like if this kind of Jesus wholeness went viral?

In order for us to be a place of healing, we have to first acknowledge our own need to be made whole. Too often we ignore the early symptoms of illness. We pretend like we are strong, we avoid important topics of conversation because we are afraid of what others might think. We try not to talk about how painful it is to lose a friend, to read harsh words on social media, and to wake up to the reality that the people in our lives are more complex (and less perfect) than we thought they were!

The truth is, all of us are in pain. All of our bodies are constantly threatened by the sicknesses that plague our society. Some of the time we may be strong enough to ward off a full infection, but even the strongest and healthiest among us feel pain.

Dr. Brené Brown states in her book, *Braving the Wilderness*, that [ignoring] “our own pain and the pain of others is not working.”³ She continues, “Pain is unrelenting. It *will* get our attention.”⁴ Like the early symptoms of a bodily illness, we have to face this stuff head on. This means that we need to pay attention to our own sources of pain.

Is there something we are still grieving? What is it?

Is there something we are afraid of? What is it?

Is there a relationship that is lost or broken? Name it.

Whatever it is that is keeping us from being made whole, we have to start there with courage and honesty.

A few moments ago we had an opportunity to name some of the sources of pain that need healing... some of the brokenness in our lives and in our communities that need to be made whole again. We lit candles signifying those difficult and hard to name things. The lighting of the candles certainly did not heal as instantly as the leper was made clean in the Gospel text, but it was a similar movement. It was a step from the margin into the center. It was an opportunity to make ourselves vulnerable in naming that we believe that God can make us clean and healthy and whole again.

Also, in the act of naming that which threatens to weigh us down we are asking our church – which is the living body of Christ – to heal us and to make us whole.

It is a mutual reaching out from both sides that we all need to survive all of the illnesses that plague our world. It is a movement from isolation to inclusion, from individual to communal, from hiding and shame to vulnerably sharing our lives with others in faithful community. This is what the Gospel is all about.

In the sharing of our pain we can draw close to one another, we can pray with one another and with God’s help we can share life together without fearing contamination. The healthy can extend their hands with a promise of healing and the sick can bravely ask to be made whole. Over time we will each find ourselves on all sides of that equation.

But it all starts with a leper who is willing to come into the center and the body of Christ who is willing to reach out a hand and say, “I do choose... be made clean.” ...over and over and over again.

That is what it looks like when wholeness goes viral.

³ Brené Brown. *Braving the Wilderness*. Loc. 771

⁴ Ibid. Loc. 781

Benediction*

May God bless you and keep you,

May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short;

 grace to risk something big for something good;

 grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth

 and too small for anything but love.

So may God take your feet and move through them.

May God take your hands and work through them.

May God take your hearts and set them on fire.

Amen.

*adapted from William Sloan Coffin and H. Stephen Shoemaker