

We Did Not Know!
Mark 1:40-45

A couple of months ago, I heard one of our older members share that during the holocaust years in Europe and before World War II, many Americans just did not know what was happening to the Jews in Europe. No one even imagined the brutality and horror of the holocaust. After that experience, the Jews and others wanted to make sure that such an atrocity would never happen to them again. As a result, the Genocide Convention adopted by the United Nations in 1948 was meant as a pledge to ensure the horrors of the Holocaust would never be repeated. But that promise was not really honored by the world community. I wish we can say that genocide never happened after 1948. All we have to do is look at experiences like Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, and Gaza. But unfortunately we find ourselves many times still saying, "We did not know!" Or "how do you expect us to know about everything in the world?" I can understand such responses in the 1930s and the 1940s but how could it be possible today? With the information age and all the technology that can bring us news from every corner of the earth just as they are taking place, how can we just not know?

I believe that the issue is not about information or lack of it. The problem is much deeper. It is an issue of significance. Those who are normally not that important in the world do not get the same attention as those who are rich, powerful or famous. With the exception of Joe the Plumber, most ordinary people live their lives without great fame. This is even more so for those who are oppressed or marginalized in our world. The Jews of Nazi Germany were not the powerful people of the time and there was a prevalent prejudice against them in all of Europe. The same is true today with those who are oppressed. They are often those who are not known to us or who are even despised in society. They are often nameless to us. We just know them by the labels we put on them.

Today's Bible story is about a nameless man, a man who is only known to us as a leper, a label. He is a man deemed by his own society an outsider and as someone to be despised. During that time in history and according to the purifications laws found in the book of Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 and later on in the Jewish Mishnah we find teachings and conversations about how to deal with skin diseases. Priests/rabbis were designated to inspect such illnesses in order to deal with contagious diseases. If the priest decided that someone's skin disease was contagious, then they would have been isolated from society. Re-entry was possible but needed to be done properly. The rabbis/priests were basically practicing community health care. But of course the problem comes when people with contagious diseases become nameless, when they are treated as outsiders, when they are despised and then basically their rights and even their very lives don't matter. Society ostracized them and left them out of any social circles. We can simply say today, oh well, they just didn't know any better. But the fact of the matter is that the rights of those with leprosy were waived for the sake of the rest of society and as a result they were made invisible to society.

It is interesting to see Jesus' reaction to this. In verse 41 the original text shows a textual variant for what we normally read as "being moved with pity," which is *orgistheis* "being angry." But even if the word "pity" is selected, it is not a simple word of pity. The literal meaning in Greek of *splagchnizomai* "pity" is "having one's intestines turn." So, Jesus has these intense feelings in response to the condition of this nameless man with leprosy and how he was objectified and oppressed by the priests and rabbis. In fact, after the man is healed, Jesus sends him back as a testimony to the priest and in turn to the whole community.

Jesus saw the injustice of the situation and saw an opportunity for healing not only the man but also the social system that oppressed lepers and excluded them. This is in line with the fact that in Capernaum Jesus had surprised those worshipping and studying in the synagogue by teaching with a new kind of authority (Mark 1:22). He was not part of the oppressive powers of society. He was teaching to heal and to uproot the powers that oppressed people. His time in Capernaum, just a few verses before this story, was a strong effort for social reform. Jesus was of course acting in the long line of prophets before him who dared challenge and heal their societies. This story of healing has a parallel in the Hebrew Scripture with Elisha healing Naaman the Syrian commander 2 Kings 5:1-14 which was our first reading this morning.

It is easy to look at this story and focus on the individual's personal gift of healing, but the power of Christ's healing is about a larger scheme that includes the transformation of all of society. I remember going to Egypt and being invited to preach/teach about this passage in a small community center for garbage collectors and their families. These were people literally living in a garbage dump. They worked all day on sorting out garbage. They saw themselves as the lepers who needed the healing of Jesus but didn't see that Jesus' healing can also mean social change and justice. I was amazed at how these people were taught this story just as individualistic piece that had very little to do with their daily struggles.

This story can be the antidote for our "we don't know" attitudes and for spiritualizing our faith. The Spirit of Christ that didn't tolerate the injustice committed against the leper is calling us today to pay attention to those who are nameless in our community and in our world. May be some of us right here this morning are experiencing some kind of injustice that no one knows about. Whether we ourselves are oppressed or not, the Spirit of Christ who healed the leper and defied an unjust system, is calling us to pay attention to those who remain nameless in our world, including ourselves when we become nameless to others. The German theologian and pastor Martin Niemöller said this beautifully about his struggle with the oppressive power of Nazi Germany,

"First they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the Communists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me
and there was no one left
to speak out for me."

The call of the Spirit is hard because it sometimes leads us to those uncomfortable struggles that we would rather not deal with or even feel that we don't know enough about. But the result of this call is that all of us are able to experience the fullness of life together. The answer to genocide in our world is not just having an international agreement or convention against genocide. The call of the gospel is for all of us never to be in that place where we say, "We did not know," because knowing and embracing that which is scary or uncomfortable for us is the path to true love and action. The kingdom of God is not just a spiritual reality for those who are "good." The kingdom of God is for all because God so loved the world.

The Spirit of Christ has led our mission committee for this bicentennial year to focus every month on a special mission or advocacy issue to help us learn about issues of injustice in our community and in our world. We are going to have opportunities for all of us to learn about the issues, find hands-on ways to make a difference and advocate for justice so that all will be named.

The story is told about St. Francis of Assisi being asked "What is that you hate and fear more than anything else?" St. Francis answered, "Lepers, that's what I hate. I can't bear the sight of them. Even when I am far away from them, just hearing the bells they wear to warn passers-by to keep their distance is enough to make me faint." That's when St. Francis realized that in order for him to truly love God, he had to embrace and kiss a leper. And sure enough a leper appears with his hands without fingers and his lips oozing wounds. St. Francis runs towards the leper embraces him and kisses him and then lifts him up to take him to a place to help care for him. But suddenly St. Francis stops, the leper has vanished only to realize that it was not a leper that he had embraced. It was Christ himself who came down to earth to test St. Francis. The leper was no longer a nameless object for St. Francis. He was the face of Jesus Christ. What St. Francis realized is that by embracing what is hateful, repulsive, and deathly, he in fact had embraced God: the principle of universal love.

This is the radical call of the gospel of Jesus Christ. May we always find the grace to answer this call. Amen.