

Sermon Text: Mark 1:40-45

Now, we do have some visitors here today, parents and Scout leaders, and I do especially welcome you. Sometimes when you visit a new church, especially with our high church architecture and liturgy so far, you wonder, just how am I supposed to behave? You wonder, if something in the sermon stirs me, am I allowed to say “Amen”? About once a year here at Main Street we allow an “Amen.” It’s early in the year. We have not had one yet. If you feel inclined, that’s okay. It won’t hurt the preacher’s feelings.

To the moms and the dads and volunteers who spend time with these Scouts, I salute you, but I don’t really know how to salute you because Scouting died when I was a Webelo in my hometown. In Woodruff, Scouting got down to one Scoutmaster, and he had one terrible rambunctious camp out, and he quit! He took the equipment, and he took the bus, which was his, and the whole program folded. Rumor had it, that on that particular camp out, he actually warned a Scout, and he warned a Scout, and he tied him to a tree overnight! It might have been time to retire. Chip, I don’t know. Chip’s looking down like well, I’ve done that. I don’t know.

I heard another story about some Upstate city Scouts, who went camping down around where I used to be for seven years, Bamberg in the swamps of the Low Country where the mosquitoes are prehistoric and roughly the size of small birds and have hypodermic needles as mouths. These Upstate boys were hiding under their blankets, and one of them peaked out and saw a swarm of lightning bugs, and he cried out, “We might as well give up boys, they’re coming after us with flashlights!”

Now, I used to love reading the hero stories in “Boy’s Life.” Is there still a “Boy’s Life” magazine? They had a hero story of the month. Now, Scouting for boys and girls is always about being prepared and about helping and serving, prepared to save yourself or to act calmly and to save others who are in trouble. I read those hero stories, and I always wanted to be one. It’s fashionable now, I am afraid, to make fun of the values of Scouting in some circles. I mean faith and patriotism and integrity and honesty and thriftiness and heroism. People make fun of those values until they need someone who lives them out.

A former Scout, who is now engaged to my daughter, Christina, named Adam, was driving with my daughter a few years back on a dark back road to Columbia from Bamberg, and Adam saw what he thought were some taillights off in a ditch. They turned around to see if they could help, and they found, yes, it was a car, and there was a badly shaken up woman lying out beside her upside down car. To make matters worse, she spoke only Spanish, but so did Adam. Using his basic first aid training, he called 911, and assessed her situation, calmed her down, and he stayed to interpret for the EMS workers. Now, that’s the kind of story that I used to love to read in “Boy’s Life,” and I still do. Part faith and part highly-developed sense of right and wrong and part good citizenship all played out in the world.

We all need help from time to time, and Jesus lived out a life helping others, a life offering help and hope beyond just physical needs. He offered help and hope for the woundedness and the weakness and the neediness in our souls. Now, this will sound

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wrong when I first say it, but it's true, in a way, I am jealous of AA members, in a way I really am because they start each meeting by saying, “My name is so and so and I am an alcoholic,” and they move on from there. Well, we ought to start worship by saying, “My name is Jim, and I am a sinner. I am broken. I am wounded, but thanks be to God, I am being healed, and I look forward to final healing and salvation through Jesus Christ, who was also tempted by sin.” He was lied about. He was broken by this world. He was wounded, and He was rejected. You see, Jesus has scars.

There's something funny about boys. I think it is only boys. Boys are proud of their scars. They are. My old friend, David Schmidt, years ago, he had an emergency appendectomy. Well, his appendix apparently was not where it was supposed to be. He had never studied anatomy. The surgeons had to cut a much larger cut than they normally do, so he had this huge scar, and when he would go swimming, and you know, have on just swim trunks, he made up these stories about this horrific knife fight that he been in. Boys love scars, girls not so much. I could ask some of these boys here, “Who has the best scar?” Somebody here has a really good scar and a story behind it, don't they? Nobody's going to raise their hand, but I know they do. They compare them.

Scars prove something. We can be wounded pretty badly, and we can still heal. We're here. We're alive. Jesus knows and God knows what it is like to be me and to be you. We are all wounded, and if we pretend to be perfect, and if you as a Christian pretend to be perfect, well, we take away one of God's best stories, salvation for the wounded and the weak by the cross of Jesus Christ. If we were perfect, if we were even perfectible, then Jesus and His cross would become optional, and I think that is an insult to God. We are not perfect, and we are not even perfectible outside of God's help. We need God, and we need each other. That was God's vision for creation from the beginning, wasn't it?

Now, back to the leper. In Jesus' day, a leper was as good as dead, and their only company was other lepers, and their future was disfigurement and then death. They were required to cry out and warn people when they were coming, to cry out “Unclean, unclean.” One cried out to Jesus, “Help me. You can heal me if you want to.” Jesus said, “I want to.” Jesus did. Now, can you imagine the joy of being cleansed from such a walking death and how thankful you would be? Well, remember what it is that Jesus has done for us. Remove the guilt of our sin. Remove the dead weight of guilt from our hearts. Remove the fear of death. Jesus has loved us. He has forgiven us and made us able to feel again, life and hope and an open future. Now, these things are worthy of gratitude, worthy to be passed on to others in need, and we are all in need, and we all have scars. Many of them are self-inflicted. Sin is the root of most. Leprosy is almost a perfect analogy for sin. You see, leprosy medically starts in small spots, and it spreads either eating up healthy flesh or turning healthy flesh into insensitive leather where you can no longer feel. It deadens the nerves so you can't feel. You don't even know that you're hurting yourself. You don't even know when something is infected or broken or bleeding. Unless a leper looks at the wound, he would never know that it is there. It is exactly the same with sin in our lives. Sin starts in small secret patches, and spreads eating up our lives, leaving sometimes great big holes where healthy soul once was. Sin deadens the nerves so that we don't even know that we are hurting others, and in sin, you sometimes cannot feel how spiritually sick or broken you are unless you look at the sin. You might not realize. It can consume you and make your life a grotesque thing without

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your ever feeling a thing. One bad choice after another, bad decision at a time, each one freely made and turning us further away from God until we find ourselves out way deep and crying, “Someone save me!” There is good news. There is good news. Don’t miss it. Cry out, “God save me!” and God will. In Jesus’ day, lepers were indeed treated as if they were already dead. The very minute that it was diagnosed, according to Leviticus, they were cast out of the community, and they had to stay outside of the camp, and yell at everyone, “I’m unclean,” and stay away from everybody else. When this unclean man reached up to Jesus and Jesus took his hand, imagine that moment! The need was so great, and Jesus’ compassion was even greater. He touched a leper! There is a big mystery here, a mystery that might affront our sensibilities. We like to believe that Jesus is in our blessings, that Jesus is in our good choices and in our discipline and in our health and our wholeness, and we like to think that that is where Jesus resides, and sometimes we think that God is absent. We say, “Jesus, where did you go?” when there is some disorder or some disease of our minds or souls or bodies.

So often, I’ve heard people wonder out loud, “Where is God when I suffer and when I hurt and when I cry out in pain?” We wonder that only because we’ve read the Gospel with our minds, but we haven’t really read it with our hearts. Our hearts should know that Jesus is with the outcast. He is touching the lepers. He is forgiving the adulterers just before the stones fly. Jesus is drawn to and He is sidetracked by, He is stopped, and He is mobbed by the ill and the disturbed and the demon possessed. That is where Jesus is, in your Bible and in mine. Somehow we have domesticated Him, and we keep Him in clean brick buildings and orderly pews and fresh-pressed clothing. Just looking out, if I did not know you all better, I would think that no one here has a problem in the world! But I do know better! I am truly and deeply becoming your pastor, and besides, after 25 years, I know that there is brokenness and disease of soul on every single pew. The greater the pretense of perfection, the more horrible what lies underneath. The truth is we need each other and we need God and we need people willing to help and willing to be helped. We are broken. We need God as lover of our souls and forgiver of our sins and maker of peace because a lot of us are just one drop of the hat from starting some private little war at home or at work or you name it, and you know it. This I know because I know people, and I am not sure of the grammar here, but because I am people, and all of us have sinned and all of us are broken. Now, where is the good news? Let me remind you, first it is good news that Jesus hangs out with and He stops and He spends time with and He grabs the hands of and He offers healing and hope to those who know that they are wounded and broken inside. Jesus, of all things, died nailed to a cross, and knows about suffering and what this world does to us. We all have scars. It’s bad on the one hand, but remember, living people with scars proves that healing does happen. Yes, bad things happen, but the love of God and the people of God when we do it right can facilitate real healing of souls and real wholeness and belonging right here and right now, no pretense of perfection is required.

Nobody thinks that I am perfect. In fact, I think my wife is sitting somewhere over there, where is Caroline? Am I perfect? No, but that’s okay. Caroline is not my judge, ultimately.

God is my hope and God is my healer and God is who invited me into this ministry, into this church of His, and God has made me brother of you all and made us brothers and

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sisters and debtors to one another, no matter the wound, no matter the wound. There is an ancient tale of Francis of Assisi. He was riding on horseback through the countryside, and he saw a poor leper beside the side of the road, begging with his wooden bowl. The leper's grotesque features jarred his sensibilities, and he recoiled a bit in horror, and looked away, and then recovering just a bit, he tossed some coins at the man, and kept on riding. Soon though, he slowed his horse down, and he seemed unsure of what to do next, and then he was sure, and he turned around, and went back to where the leper was with the begging bowl, picking up the coins off the ground where he had thrown them, and he jumped off his horse, and he embraced him. The leper came to Jesus believing that he could be healed. Now, the leper was told to keep it a secret, but he could not keep it a secret. He jumped up and down a healed man, and he told everyone. Maybe that's Jesus' plan for evangelism. Tell no one might be the best way to tell everyone. I don't know, but I do know that scars are proof that healing happens.

The really good thing for the former leper was that he could go home, that he could go back into his town; he could go back into his home and his family. He could touch people, and other people could touch him. Back to synagogue and back to temple, back into the bosom of his worshipping community because he was no longer an outcast.

I have to ask the question, and I want you to echo the question in your own head and heart. Where can I go where I belong completely? Where can I go where people will touch me even if I am broken? Where can I go where I am accepted and loved? Where can I go where I don't have to hide my damage? Where can I go without fear of rejection? Where can I go so that when I reach up and reach out, I can be assured that someone will reach down and hold my hand? I am describing God's Kingdom, and what Jesus was preaching was that God's Kingdom had come in Him, and preaching that good news was the major thing, and the healing of the leper was simply part of the proof that God's Kingdom was for real. God's Kingdom is the place where I belong completely, where people will touch me even if I am broken, where I am accepted and loved, where I don't have to hide my damage, where I can go without fear of rejection, where I can reach up and out, and be assured that someone will reach down, and hold my hand.

What is Main Street United Methodist Church if not an outpost for that very Kingdom of God? The leper knew that God in Christ would welcome him and touch him and make him whole. A little over a month from now, we are going to begin a worship attendance crusade, and we will be welcoming people from all over this community, and you will be inviting and bringing inactive members and relatives and people you work with and friends, and when they get here, will we touch them, and will we accept them, and will we welcome them? I hope so because it is God's house, not ours, and Jesus is both the doorkeeper and Jesus is the door, and He's left it wide open. Jesus touched lepers, and He offered them healing and wholeness. May we offer healing and hope to those who come looking for God in the world. May they find God here among us in this outpost of the Kingdom. May we stand ready as those who proudly bear healed scars without pretense of perfection, knowing that we need God, and knowing that we need each other, and knowing this place, this very place, is healing, holy ground. Amen.