



# Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1318  
Mark 1:40–42  
Steve Aurell  
September 23, 2007

## The Power of a Godly Touch

---

Since God called me into recovery oriented and counseling ministries about 16 years ago, much of my time has been spent interacting with those who are experiencing great pain. That seems to be the nature of the beast. But it would be wrong to conclude that pain is unique to only a particular sector of our church community. The truth is, we are all well acquainted with pain—whether it be spiritual, physical, emotional or relational. As newborns our cry is also the first sign that life has arrived. And throughout the remainder of our days our experience confirms for us that few things are more consistent or universal. Pain flows like lava beneath the crust of our daily lives. It's greedy, meanly debilitating and, as its Latin root *poena* implies, is the cost each of us ultimately suffers for being alive. And yet, pain can also be a great teacher if we learn to listen and attend to its voice. However, if you are like me, oftentimes our response is to silence it, run from it like a plague, or anesthetize ourselves at whatever cost. We come to view pain as an enemy, like some sinister invader that must be extinguished. Yet silencing pain without considering its source is like disconnecting a fire alarm to avoid the news that our house is indeed on fire. Once regarded in this way pain loses its awesome power to instruct us about God's ways and the limits He imposes for our protection and care. Truly, pain is the gift no one wants.

Jesus alone was the only one who both understood and mastered pain. This is one of the reasons we study His life. He's the expert. He always navigated the dark valleys and wilderness crossings with perfect integrity, neither denying pain nor allowing His suffering to control Him. The prophet Isaiah called Jesus "the suffering servant" whose purpose was devoted to ministering to those broken beneath the wheels of living. There is a Jewish legend about a rabbi who asked the prophet Elijah when the Messiah would come. Elijah replied that the rabbi should ask Him directly and that he would find Him sitting at the gates of the city. "How will I know Him?" the rabbi asked. Elijah replied, "He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds." The rabbi then went to Jesus and said to Him, "Peace unto

you, my master and teacher." Jesus answered, "Peace unto you, son of Levi." "When is the Messiah coming?" the rabbi asked. "Today," the Lord answered. Then the rabbi returned to Elijah who asked, "What did He tell you?" "He has deceived me," the rabbi cried, "for He said 'Today I'm coming, but He has not yet come.'" Elijah shook his head and said, "No, my son! This is what He told you, 'Today! If you would just listen for His voice.'"

To announce that Jesus is sitting among us and that our wounds are a sign of hope is a concept few would embrace. But this is precisely the Gospel message: The Messiah is coming—not tomorrow, but today; not next year, but this year; not after all our pain and suffering has passed, but in the midst of it; not in another place, but right here where we're all sitting. You see, Jesus always pointed to Himself as the source of healing. "I am the way," He said. And so, this morning we are going to look at Jesus' encounter with the leper in Mark's gospel. It's a familiar story for most of us. And we want to focus our attention on how Jesus provided grace and healing to this man. Turn with me to Mark 1:40-42.

**"And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, 'If You are willing, You can make me clean.' Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I am willing; be cleansed.' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed."**

Leprosy was a progressive and chronic disease. In the Old Testament there is no mention of treatment or remedy. In fact, the majority believed that its cure could only be accomplished by a miracle. It was, without a doubt, the most feared disease on the face of the earth (much like AIDS or the most aggressive forms of cancer are today) and could strike anyone at any time. Beginning with a little speck on the eyelids, leprosy gradually spread over the entire body, causing swelling and sores that would not heal. Then it ate its way into the tissues, bones and marrow, essentially rotting the whole body piecemeal. The nervous system was attacked, and coupled with the deterioration of the fingers, hands, toes and feet, the leper could no longer

feel or interpret pain accurately. They could lose a limb yet show no sign of discomfort, touch a fire and not realize they'd been burned. Can you imagine what it would be like to lose sensory contact with the nervous system, the senses of touch, temperature, or pressure reduced to garbled distortions? Without accurate signals one wouldn't be able to discern external boundaries, where our world ended and the "real" world began. In what, then, could one trust? Such was the leper's plight. What made it worse was that the duration of the disease could be anywhere from 10 to 30 years. And its outcome was always the same—a slow and progressive process towards a certain death.

But as tragic as the physical suffering was, the social suffering was worse. People of that day believed that leprosy was a direct "stroke of God," as punishment for sin. It didn't matter how much status one had; if anyone contracted leprosy they became an "untouchable." They would then have to move outside the city, go about in torn clothes, with coverings over their mouths, as was done in mourning for the dead. And by all rights the leper was a dead person, having to call out "unclean, unclean" in warning to those passing by. By law, one could not pass within six feet of a leper; or, if the wind came from that direction a hundred feet would be scarcely sufficient. Can you imagine the stigma? The alienation of family, of friends, of loved ones...living with the belief that you were stricken by God Himself?

This leper was, in every way, "the ultimate outcast": infected by a condition he didn't seek, condemned to a future he couldn't possibly bear. He was, no doubt, a desperate man, with no hope in himself whatsoever. And he had most likely heard that this Jesus of Nazareth was healing people. So he positioned himself somewhere near Jesus, broke through the crowd, and threw himself at the Lord's feet. How the religious crowd must have recoiled when they realized what this leper had done. "How inappropriate," they probably muttered, "for someone to approach the Messiah in this way." But the truth is what this leper did was entirely appropriate.

People often wrongly believe they must clean themselves up before coming to the Lord. Some of us may feel such shame that we think we need to do something to somehow qualify for the presence of God, as if there was some esoteric rite of passage or initiation fee required before we can join a "truly spiritual" fellowship. "I'll wait until I'm a little more presentable," we think, or "less needy." "Then I'll be more qualified to sit in that church and place my life in His hands." But

this leper couldn't do anything to help himself. And furthermore, the same is true of ourselves. At the core of every heart we need to be touched by God in a place we can't touch ourselves. Trying to fix ourselves before coming to God would be like saying, "I can't go to the doctor, I'm too sick! What would he think?" What a ridiculous idea! Doctors are into sick people; that's what they do. And so is God! But there is something in every one of us that feels unworthy of being served like that. And this is precisely why we need to come to the Lord. It is perfectly appropriate for those who are needy and hurting to come Him. Jesus Himself insisted upon this.

In the second chapter of Mark, some of the religious leaders criticized Jesus because He was hanging out with the outcasts, those who had been ostracized and alienated. He kept eating meals with them, ministering to their needs, bringing hope into their hopeless worlds. These "spiritual leaders" were scandalized by His love: that He would love the unlovable, accept the unacceptable, especially those who were spiritually bankrupt and broken by life. The ones who had been told, "you can't measure up" or those with a checkered past. Jesus loved these folks. And He said a really significant thing to these religious leaders. When they asked, "Why are you eating and drinking with "these"...?" He replied, "It's not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Isn't that great! How many of us grew up thinking that Jesus came for those who had it all together? That's what I thought. When I first came to this church and looked at all you folks I assumed you didn't have issues like me. I was comparing my "insides" with your "outsides." But after a few hours I knew better and was relieved to know that we all bleed the same way. Granted, some of us bleed more than others. But that's an issue of "quantity" and not "quality." Since then I've developed this theory—the body of Christ was never created to be a social club for the righteous but a recovery home for the hurting. Jesus came to those in need of a Savior. He came to those with sin-scarred faces. He came to life's casualty. That's the very person Jesus came to help. He came for us!

Now the next thing we see in this story is the quality of this leper's faith. He falls on his knees before the Lord and says, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." This is a great statement of faith.

Jesus must have loved what He heard from this leper's mouth. He didn't doubt Christ's authority but said, in effect, "I know that You have the power to heal me." Can you imagine being a leper, disfigured with years of disease and knowing in your heart that God has the power to heal you? What a wonderful quality of faith that is! We all need a little bit of what he had. But then he said, "If You are willing." This leper had been so alienated, so beat up, that he didn't believe he was worth it. In essence, what he was saying was, "Lord, I know You can do it, but I have good reason to think You wouldn't want to do it with someone like me. You see, I've been down too far; I've had too many chances." You see what he is saying! Every one of us feels that way at times, don't we? Some of us even this morning might be thinking, "I wish I could be where they're at, but not me!" or "I know You can heal me, Lord, but I really don't think You would consider me worth the effort!" What a tragic statement for someone to think "why would You even take the time for someone like me?"

Well, Jesus must have found this man's honesty, his vulnerability and his faith tremendously refreshing. Listen to the Lord's response in v.41, "**And moved with compassion, He stretched out His hand, and touched him, and said to him 'I am willing; be cleansed.'**" The first thing we see is that Jesus was "moved with compassion." Jesus looked down at this man on his knees, and then He looked at the religious crowd who must have been looking on with self-righteous indignation. He looked at this man with a shattered self-image, one who had been rejected countless times, and saw a broken heart. That's what the Lord saw. And He was moved with compassion. How that leper's heart must have stirred as he saw that look of compassion and understanding in Christ's eyes. Is there anything more powerful to someone who is hurting than compassion and empathy? Oftentimes when we express our pain we receive some pretty weird responses. Some respond with "suggestions" or unsolicited direction: thump the Bible in our faces. Others may respond with inappropriate judgment and we are left standing alone with a raw wound that is still bleeding. But nothing is more significant or reaches us at a deeper level than to see the look of compassion and empathy in the midst of our pain and defeat.

Awhile back I was telling part of my prison history to a therapist friend of mine that I had done some work with in the past. As I recall, I was communicating it without much emotion: as if it was somebody else's story or part of a repressed past that was too painful for me to really

connect with. I was telling her that the only time I ever really felt safe in a prison environment was when my cell door was shut, when I was encased alone within concrete and steel. And at one point I looked up at her and she was crying. She was moved with compassion for my experience. Her heart was breaking for me at a place where mine couldn't. Do you know that God looks at every one of us with this kind of compassion? He knows why we are where we are, what took us where we needed to go. But be clear about one thing—it doesn't bug Him a bit. We're not too much for Him to handle. Our stuff is not too thick for Him. God looks at our hearts in the same way that Jesus looked upon this leper, with compassion.

Then Jesus does an amazing thing. He reaches out, touches the leper and speaks a word of healing. Now, in the Gospels it is clear that Jesus didn't need to touch someone in order to heal them. So why did He do it? Besides, if anyone had physical contact with a leper, the law declared them unclean. In other words, if you touched an "untouchable", you became untouchable yourself. So Jesus, fully aware of the law, reaches down, touches the leper and becomes unclean Himself. What a curious thing! Well, consider this: how long do you think it had been since this leper had last been touched? 5 years? 10 years? 20 years? This touch of Jesus shows that His concern ran deeper than the leper's physical need. Jesus was concerned about his emotional scars as well, all the rejections and disapprovals, the depth of loneliness at the core of his heart. How the tears must have run down that disfigured face as he felt the touch of the Lord upon his shoulder. You know, there isn't a person alive who doesn't have areas of pain that are untouchable, not one of us. Areas of excess, of fear, of unforgiveness. We're ashamed of these things. We hide them away. Well, there is only one hope for the kind of shame and fear that we all live with at times—it comes in the power of a Godly touch.

There is also another level to this meaning of being touched by the Lord's hand. This miracle, more than any other, best typifies what Jesus did on the cross for all of mankind. In touching the leper He identified with the disease; in fact became unclean Himself. He took our addictions, our shame and our guilt upon Himself so that we could become clean. All of mankind, the Scripture says, is sick with

something that causes us to fall short of what we were intended to be. It's this twist in our hearts that causes us to hurt one another, to place our needs first. It's what makes it so difficult for us to love one another in a healthy way. Shouldn't love be natural? Does that strike anyone else as strange? Why do we have such a hard time loving one another? Why can't families get along? Why is it that the ones we love the most become the most convenient targets for our anger? What is that all about? You see, we can't explain sin away. And yet, there is no better explanation for the source of our pain and suffering. It just won't go away. We have to acknowledge that there is something dreadfully wrong with us as a race and that we all need the touch of the Lord's hand.

This is what the cross affirms in our hearts. It is here that God took the sinless Christ and poured into Him our sin "that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." When Jesus got nailed to the cross He said, "I'll take what I don't have—your sin—and give you what I do have—My grace, My truth and My forgiveness." He touched the leper, became unclean, for one reason—so that the leper could become whole again. That's what Jesus does for every one of us. We can make improvements. We can take steps, We can grow in a lot of ways. But without Christ we are merely putting a band-aid on that which requires surgery. There is a hurt in each one of us that only God can deal with. He's the Great Physician. And when He sees us at this point of pain, openly acknowledging our need for Him, He feels compassion and reaches out and touches us.

In v.42 we see the result. **"And immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed."** For us, this verse might sound something like, and "immediately" the bitterness or self-loathing disappeared. The sense of hopelessness lifted. "Immediately" God poured out His grace to heal the wounds. Renew our strength. Restore the soul. And make all things new. This is what Jesus does for us. He touches the leper and in an instant he is "recreated," in that he was "made pure." He'd been transformed from a hopeless and helpless skeleton of a man to one who knew he'd received a new lease on life. The disease of his body, mind and soul had been cleansed by the Lord's touch. Can you imagine? Just think of the joy he must have experienced as a result of seeing what God could do after all those years of suffering enormous pain. What a wonderful story. What a great picture of the grace of God we get from this account.

It doesn't matter who you are, or what your experience has been, every one of us needs a Godly touch on a daily basis. It doesn't matter what we've done or what we

haven't done, we all need our hearts cleansed and made whole by Him. Nothing else can do for us what He can do. Do you need for God to do for you what you cannot do for yourself? That's the first question this story brings to the plate this morning. Do you need His touch? Do you need to open yourself up to a whole new level? I know that's probably frightening for some; you don't know what that is going to look like. But let me encourage you to find hope in Him. You can trust Him for who He is. Right now, you can yield in your heart and say, "Lord, you can have more of me," and little by little open up areas that perhaps no one knows about. And you'll find the Lord's look of compassion within your soul. So that's the first question—do you need the compassionate touch of God's grace?

Now I trust that we would all agree that we do. The second question this text brings up, however, is a little more challenging. And that is, are we acting as dispensers of grace? Look at it this way. If a leper, an outcast or anyone society labels as unacceptable were to break through our worship service in need of help, would we respond with compassion or self-righteous indignation? Would we come alongside that broken one or call 911? What about in the work place? Would you allow for an interruption from a needy and confused employee or turn them away in disgust? I would like to think you would take the time to minister to that person. God only knows how often you have done that for me. But sadly, to a world desperate for grace, today's church often represents just one more form of un-grace. In all honesty we lack God's compassion for His people at times.

A 16-year-old prostitute came in to see a counselor one day. She was homeless, dope sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through her tears, she told the counselor that she had been seeking the favor of men ever since her father molested her at age five. She had to do this, she said, to support her heroin habit. The counselor could hardly bear listening. For one thing, it made him legally liable, for he was required to report cases of child abuse. He didn't know what to say. At last he asked if she had ever thought about going to a church for help. With a look of pure shock she cried, "Church! Why would I ever go there? I'm already disgusted with myself. They'd just make me feel worse." Now, what is striking about this story is that those who found themselves at a place of great pain ran towards the Jesus of the gospels, not away from

Him. The worse a person felt about themselves, the more likely they would be drawn to Him as a safe harbor and refuge.

The power of a Godly touch is Christ's, and therefore our, great distinctive. It is the one thing the world can't replicate, the one thing it craves above all else, for only grace can bring hope and healing to its jaded heart. In Thornton Wilder's one-act play *The Angel That Troubled the Waters*, a physician comes to a healing pool, hoping to be first in line and longing to be healed of his depression. The angel appears but blocks the physician just as he is about to step into the water. The angel tells him to draw back, for this moment is not for him. The physician pleads in a broken voice but to no avail; the angel simply responds, "Without your wounds where would your power be? It is your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men and women. The very angels themselves can't persuade the blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In Love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve. Physician, draw back." Later, the man who enters the pool first and is healed rejoices and turning to the physician says: "Please come with me. It's only an hour to my home. My son is lost in dark thoughts. I don't understand him and only you have ever lifted his mood. Only an hour . . . There is also my daughter: since her child died, she sits in the shadow. She won't listen to us but she will listen to you." Any of us who have ever been counseled by someone who had absolutely not a clue of what we may be experiencing will readily understand the significance here. We don't need canned rules or remedies, do we. We need intimate relationships. We need to connect with those who have been where we are. We need the compassion only Christ and His community can bring. Pain, once confessed or expressed in the presence of another, loses its awesome power to isolate.

As the suffering Servant, Jesus recognized His wounds, let them show, and made them available to the community as a source of healing. It would be helpful for us to follow His example. When we arise from out of the ashes of our former lives, we are reborn into an understanding, a sensitivity and, hopefully, a willingness to enter into healing encounters with those who are still suffering. This is the only thing that makes sense to me! And it's within this encounter that we can't ever allow ourselves to forget our fundamental brokenness nor our vulnerability. Our wounds must be accepted *and* acknowledged, for this is the place from which grace and healing are communicated one to another.

But here's the catch. We can only extend God's compassion to the extent that we've received it. We can't give what we do not have. Which takes us back to the first question—do you need God to do for you what you cannot do for yourself; to touch you in those places that may have you bound and are in need of His compassion. Nobody can choose but us. But then no one can touch lepers like Jesus.

© 2007 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA