

February 15, 2009

Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany, Year B (Mark 1.40-45)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

Well over a hundred years ago, a family on the outskirts of a growing southern town decided to pour some of their abundant resources into providing a proper Christian education for the area's poor working-class children.

A few years later, a chapel was added, then from there a congregation grew. Since 1903, All Saints' has been an established community of Christian celebration and, perhaps more importantly, a celebration of Christian community.

We don't do *everything* well around here. We bicker occasionally. We don't always agree on the direction of our mission and ministry. We're not perfect, but friends, we seek God and we do it together.

We're a big church and thus, by virtue of necessity we are made of myriad little communities where people know and are known. We have groups based on age and interest, based on educational desire, pastoral need and outreach. But at the start of each week, we come together and we pray and praise and confess and break bread all together, under the same roof, under the same God.

Our roots are in the Christian education of mill children, and bringing them together in community, those who came before us let those children understand that they, too, were worth knowing, and that they, too, deserved to know God in community.

In our Gospel reading this morning, a leper steps out of the shadows. That's where the lepers were, after all, in the proverbial if not actual shadows, on the farthest fringes of a society that declared them unclean on multiple levels, social, legal, ritual, religious. These were those outcast who had no place at any table, who were known and defined only by their disease, not by their virtues or their foibles, their abilities or their fears.

This man was entirely without community. He was beyond *persona non grata*, he was not even human.

With this understanding, I have come to decide that Jesus did not heal this man of his leprosy, Jesus healed him of his isolation.

There were two ways in which Jesus did this.

First, Jesus entered into the space of an isolated, diseased, exiled no-man and he touched him. Jesus touched a human being who had not been touched in God only knows how long. To do this, Jesus had to leave behind the societal, legal and religious belief that would make him, too, unclean. Jesus shut the door on those voices and chose instead to reintroduce a human being into human society.

Second, Jesus brought the man back into the community of the living. Exiled for his physical condition, the newly-clean leper was now welcome back in houses, at tables, in conversations, in friendship. Jesus chose to reopen those worlds to him, again ignoring the conventions that kept the unclean isolated from the world.

I don't fault the ex-leper for running off and telling the whole world. He was moved by the experience of re-entry into the world of the known. He now had the opportunity to talk, hold hands, smile, interact with the healthy people all around him and he wanted to share it with everyone he could.

And why wouldn't he? That is what grateful, exuberant people do. We share it. We pass it on and pay it forward.

When we are moved, with pity, with compassion or with awe, it is not just good, it is GOSPEL to pass it along, to take that movement and make something. When we are moved, it is right and good to reach out our hands, as Jesus did, to enter the space of another and draw them out of the darkness and isolation and bring them into the light of the community, the light that we have come to know as God.

We do it, too. We, this strange and wonderful and imperfect rendering of Christian community, we heal people in the same way. I know because I have seen it happen and I have done it with you.

This is one of those moments in Jesus ministry from which we can learn in a simple and easy way. We don't have to be Christ to do this. We don't have to be Jesus to reach out our hands. We just have to be moved to do so. We have to decide that we will open our community to those we love and recognize and to those that challenge us. We have to make space for those who aren't here yet and for those who might not be able to make space for themselves.

We have to choose to make it so.

Every time we send a parent home from Threads with new clothes for her child, we are saying, as Christ did, "I do choose..."

Every time we provide a safe place for someone who feels his or her self worth has been stripped away through the loss of a job, we are saying "I do choose..."

Every time we make room in the pew for someone who is different or unfamiliar, we are saying “I do choose...”

Every time we take a meal to a new family with a new baby, reminding them of their church community, we are saying “I do choose...”

Each time we baptize a new child into the life of this community and the larger Christian community we are saying, “We do choose to know you and to be known by you, to show you the face of Christ and to be that face for you. We choose to celebrate your gifts and your talents, to help you up when you stumble and to recognize you as God’s beloved child every chance we get.”

Each of us makes hundreds of choices each day, beginning with whether or not to get out of bed in the morning. Most of them are not Gospel-inducing. But the ones that bring us closer together and drive away the shadows of isolation and division, those are the choices that echo Jesus’, “I do choose.”

We are choosing to be moved and in turn to move others, into action, into prayer, into community. We are choosing to be moved, in our hearts, in our guts, in our actions. And each time we do, we are choosing to move the world with us.

Amen.