

Moved with Anger
II Kings 5:1-14
Mark 1:40-45

“Moved with anger, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’”

If you take the reports about the life-threatening shortage of methotrexate at face value (the drug that has saved the lives of countless children diagnosed with a fatal form of childhood leukemia), you will think the problem involves a faulty manufacturing mechanism. You may even think this an unavoidable glitch, an unfortunate technical problem. You think this, of course, as you look at your healthy children (knock on wood), as you turn the page on a crisis that may cause someone else’s child in the United States to begin dying within a week or two for want of an injection in his spine.

But if you begin to rout around below the surface of official statements, you come to an incredible article in the New England Journal of Medicine that was posted on November 3, 2011 [<http://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJMp1109772>]. “For the first time in the United States,” it begins, “some essential chemotherapy drugs are in short supply. Most are generic drugs that have been used for years in childhood leukemia and curable cancers.” Skipping down a paragraph, you come to the rub: “The main cause of drug shortages is economic. If manufacturers don’t make enough profit, they won’t make generic drugs.” So when a brand name drug is approved, even though it may be no more effective than the generic, production of the generic slows in favor of the brand name which, in one case cited [levoleucovorin], is 58 times as expensive. No doubt the cost of one drug underwrites the discovery of another and the advertising for yet another. This is the market at work.

The article goes on to cite a second cause that concerns the way oncologists are reimbursed. When reimbursements for drugs dropped from 95% of the average wholesale price

to 6% in 2003, the article claims that this caused oncologists to drop generic drugs in favor of name brands. “Why use [the generic] (and receive 6% of \$312) when you can use [the brand name] (for 6% of \$5,824)?” The response of oncologists begs to differ and I profess only to know enough to know that we are in the eye of a perfect storm. The fact is, with the most expensive health care in the world, we are becoming one of the least healthy nations on the planet! The outrage at so-called Obamacare on one side of the political spectrum is met, on the other, by outrage at a reform which still forces the young, the old and the working poor to choose between food and pharmaceuticals. What has any of this to do with the gospel?

To say, as we did last Sunday, that God’s reign has come near in Jesus Christ, is to say God is presently in the world, acting against every order and system opposing God’s will. Put in the affirmative, what God is doing in the world is making and keeping human life human [Paul Lehmann]. “Where the gospel which begins with Jesus and has him as its substance is preached,” said James Luther Mays a week ago, “there the reign of God is present. [Moreover] the speech that has Jesus as its substance is *the demand and chance* for men [and women] to live” as though God were sovereign over the course of their days...because God is! How, then, might we hear that demand and take the chance to live as though God were sovereign over the order of our common lives? As we have considered this question personally, now we must consider the question corporately and politically. We do so through the lens of Scripture.

First, a bit of background is necessary if we are to notice the politically disruptive enactment of God’s reign in what appears, on the surface, to be one more story about Jesus healing a sick man at the end of Mark’s first chapter. In ancient Israel, the religious community had charge of the health care system. Read the 13th and 14th of Leviticus before you go to bed tonight. There you will be given a detailed glimpse into the response of a community confronted

with contagion. Apparently priests were the ancient diagnosticians who would determine, after careful and prolonged observation, that an eruption on the skin was, in fact, leprosy. Once diagnosed, the only reasonable thing to do was to banish the person from the community, lest others be afflicted: “He shall live alone,” says Leviticus of the unclean. “His dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

Though if it should happen that the disease runs its course and the person appears to be healed, then an elaborate system of sacrifices and rituals kicks in, to the end that the person may be admitted back into the camp. There is shaving and washing and the burning of clothes, to begin. The one who desires to return to society brings guilt offerings and a log of expensive oil to be elevated before the Lord. Blood is “put on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be cleansed, and on the thumb of the right hand and on the big toe of the right foot.” Seriously! All of this to make atonement for the person whose leprosy, said religion, was more than just a disease: it was a sign of another sickness called sin.

Why am I telling you this? Because in the next paragraph of Leviticus, I could not believe what I read, “But if he is poor and cannot afford so much...” Really? Apparently ancient Israel understood the need for universal health care! The poor man had only to come with one-tenth the amount of offering in order to be cleansed and admitted back into the society. When Jesus tells the leper to “Go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them,” he surely is telling this man to pay up with the religious authorities who had the power to admit him into the camp.

But I found myself reading and rereading these words because, for some reason, this directive did not sound like Jesus. I knew I must be missing something crucial in Mark’s account of the leper’s healing.

The first clue that this story is more politically charged than it appears on the surface has to do with Jesus' response to the leper. Most translations say that Jesus was "moved with pity". Pity often is our helpless human response to a debilitating disease that has afflicted another's life and livelihood. The word, in fact, is the word for anger. Jesus was moved by anger, anger—as we are about to see--directed against the systems that thwart what God is doing in the world to make and keep human life human. In the first place, then, when God's reign comes up against whatever dehumanizes the most vulnerable in society, pity will not do. Anger and outrage are the only faithful response.

The second clue to Mark's meaning is given in the leper's words. He knows that a different sort of power has come close to him in the person of Jesus. He does not say "If you can", but "If you choose, you can make me clean." He believes himself to be in the presence of a man who has the power to declare him clean. Lights should go on in the head of anyone who has read Leviticus. This man has ventured out of his isolation because the leprosy is gone; he is ready to be pronounced clean by a priest. But he comes with no offering to cover the cost of his readmission to society. Rather, he comes to Jesus as one who trembles before God's freedom (If you choose...) and who trusts completely in God's power (you can make me clean). We would do well to do the same, in the second place, if we are to hear the demand and take the chance to live as though God reigns.

The third clue is in Jesus' action. In defiance of the Torah's sophisticated understanding of contagion, and assuming the priestly prerogative, Jesus touches this man who has not yet been declared clean. I imagine the disciples gasping in horror. According to religion, the cost of the leper's cleanliness has become Jesus' contamination. "I do [choose]," Jesus declares. "Be made clean!" What was only to be had for a price is bestowed freely by him who has paid the price

with his own flesh. This is the grace that claims any who seek to follow him, that seek to live in the lively, reckless abandon of God's reign come near.

But what is to be made of the meaning of Jesus' final command to the leper? "Go and show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." "Most English translations give the impression that Jesus instructed the leper to abide by the priestly ritual," writes Quaker scholar Ched Myers. "This, however, misses the point of the story and its tone as well." Jesus' command is a command that actually sends the man *back* to the priest, implying that the man's petition to be declared clean had previously been rejected. He is to make the offering prescribed for cleansing, says Jesus, not as a testimony *to* them but as a witness *against* them. Jesus' anger is anger against the "system that subjects the physically ailing [and outcast] to a double oppression [says Myers]: not only are they second class citizens in Israel, but they must make special payment as well."

Remember the provision I took to be an enlightened statute in ancient Israel concerning the health and restoration of the poor to full humanity in the community? In the light of God's reign, Jesus exposes it for what it is: the health care establishment—in this case, the priests and the temple--exactng from those who are least able to pay up, a price for the gift that is God's restoration of their health and humanity.

No doubt the man is returned, empty-handed and healthy, to an audience that likely will be hostile. I have no doubt that we are that audience. For the most part, we are the community that benefits from the society as it has been ordered. God knows, we are not the 1%, but neither are most in this crowd, including this priest, among that number who must decide whether to feed our child or buy her the medicine that will keep her from getting sicker. Can we not hear in this story *the demand and chance* to live as though God were sovereign over the order of our

common life? If God's reign has come close in him who declared the leper clean and sent him to the health care system of his day as a witness against those who benefit from the system, then surely what God is doing in the world to make and keep human life human has something to do with sending us into the world as a community angry that human health and well-being belongs only to those who can earn enough to afford it. Viewed from within the reign of God, health and wholeness is a gift of the God who is making and keeping human life human. We thwart God's will when we order our common life such that health and wholeness increasingly become the possession of those who can pay for them. Our common life is diminished, not by the sin of the sick but by the sickness and sin at the heart of a society bent on keeping the most vulnerable outside the camp, keeping the sick out of sight, until it should happen that our child dies because the profit-margin does not warrant saving his life.

Jesus tells the leper to see that he says nothing to anyone. But the leper could not keep silent. I pray that this community will hear the demand and take the chance to do as the leper did: to tremble before God's freedom, to trust completely in God's power, to oppose every system that thwarts God's will, and thereby to bear witness to the God who is in the world, making and keeping human life human. Thanks be to God. Amen.