

## “Getting Clean” 2 Kings 5:1-14, Mark 1:40-45

A sermon by Stephen Miller for Cristo del Valle Presbyterian Church, Albuquerque, NM, February 12, 2012

Remember the old commercial trying to get us to make long-distance phone calls? It was “Reach out and touch someone.” It tapped into everyone’s need to be touched. There is actually something healing about being touched. Studies prove it. People who aren’t touched are sicker than others.

Touch is powerful. Touch can heal and touch can destroy. Power is power for good or for ill. So touch can be nurturing or it can be abusive. So much depends on both the toucher and the touched.

We each come from different cultures, backgrounds, and sets of experiences. So I can’t assume that my touch means to you what I want it to mean. I have to be aware of your personal space. Sometimes I need to ask, but mostly I have to be sensitive. I can’t assume that what would be healing to me would be healing to you. Yet we see in scripture and experience in life that we are healed and we heal in our contact with each other.

When I had prostate cancer I counted on many sources of healing. The cancer was detected early. The prognosis was always good. I came through the surgery fine and recovered quickly with no side-effects. I was lucky. I didn’t want attention. I’m an introvert. But I did ask for prayers. Many people prayed for me. I spent hours in meditation, and I did my best to follow the rules medically and spiritually. It was all part of the healing process.

Does it always work? Maybe that depends on what we mean by “work.” We all die. We’re mortal. And most of us don’t choose how or when this mortal life ends. Sometimes many people pray for a healing. Sometimes they use touch and ceremony. Sometimes the results seem like a miracle. Sometimes people feel like God refused to listen. We live in the Mystery, and we pray in the awareness that the results are beyond our control. God is not a tool to be used for our will. Rather, we try to be tools to be used for God’s purposes.

That being said, I believe prayer works. Some people are able to affirm that even as they die. We may not get the results we hoped for, but the presence of the Master Healer brings wholeness. Isn’t that most important?

The possibility of healing, it seems, is built into the universe. Most religions have healers. They all demonstrate results. From the shamans and witch doctors of aboriginal people to the dances of Sufis to Hindu rites and Buddhist meditation, human beings discover the Source of healing and are made whole.

Today’s story from Mark is one expression of that process. We’re still in the first chapter of Mark. Today we heard the third healing story from this chapter. First we heard Mark express Jesus’ authority regarding the Sabbath and the Holy place of the synagogue casting our spiritual demons. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. Then Mark’s Jesus goes immediately to an ordinary house and heals a woman of a physical fever. Jesus is Lord of the

secular world and of both men and women – even in a time when women weren’t supposed to count. Today Jesus takes on yet another dimension. Dirt. Uncleanliness. Defilement.

So we move from the holy to the ordinary to the lowest of all circumstances. Jesus is Lord of all. So what is that to me?

The scripture says this man had a skin disease. Some translations say leprosy. That’s Hansen’s disease in today’s medical books. But we don’t know what it was except that he was unclean. He was an untouchable. He was an outcast. He was deservedly the bottom of the barrel both societally and religiously. Jesus helped him in the process of getting clean.

In both the Elisha story and the story from Mark, the process of getting clean includes both the action of the healer and the action of the one wanting to be healed. Elisha makes Naaman wash in waters sacred to Elisha but not to Naaman. Naaman does his part despite his misgivings. The man in Mark has to fulfill the ritual law of Moses to get his license to be treated as a human. He was already clean, but needed to do his part even afterwards.

We can find ourselves as the man who needs to get clean. We may carry guilt, shame, or a sense of being rejected or deserving to be rejected. Or we may have a physical disease or disability that makes us feel less than whole. We can tap into this story for the assurance that Jesus reaches out to touch us with healing grace and love. No one is beneath the One who created us, sustains us, and calls us eventually home.

The unclean man tells Jesus, “If you want to, you can make me clean.”

So, Mark tells us, Jesus, was filled with pity. Increasingly experts in ancient Greek, say the translation should be “filled with anger.” It’s a footnote in the Bibles in this sanctuary. Whether pity at the man’s condition or anger at society’s response, Jesus touched the unclean. Feel the touch. Can you do that? Find whatever within you needs that touch, and feel it.

Then realize you are not simply the unclean one. You are also the Body of Christ. Where can you find a leper? Who is considered unclean? Who do some people look down on? How can you touch them?

Keep those thoughts in mind as we move on. Christ touches us at our most unclean level, and we are called to touch the unclean among and around us.

I need to back up a step to get another dimension. Remember the three healing stories in Mark 1? Mark proclaims the Lordship of Christ over every dimension of life. What dimensions of life does the Body of Christ touch today in the process of getting something clean? Many. Every. U.S. politics, international relations, interfaith relations, the Holy Land, everything. I want to focus on just one for the moment.

Interfaith Power and Light is calling churches throughout the country to love the earth. Interfaith Power and Light helps faith communities reduce the carbon footprint of church buildings and members' houses. IPL also helps us take action on environmental concerns. So I have some literature I hope you'll take home. I also think we can apply the scriptures.

Interfaith Power and Light says the earth has leprosy and we are called upon to make it clean. I buy that. But it's only part of the story because we are part of the earth, so we have leprosy. We've been touching the earth all our lives. Touch is powerful, but it's not always positive. As the earth touches us and we touch the earth, how can we make it part of the process of getting clean?

I write songs. I sing about what's most important to me. So I have many songs about earth.

The Center for Action and Contemplation had a conference a while back on Creation as the Body of God. I wrote the theme song expressing this incarnation. Here it is:

*Praise to the moon and the stars and the sun.  
Creation is the Body of God.  
Creator and Creation surely are one.  
Creation is the Body of God.  
From beyond the farthest galaxies to the heart of every  
atom, We connect with the Spirit's pulsing power.  
On this small fragile planet spinning blue in our orbit,  
We count the blessings of this day and of this hour.  
Praise to the moon ...  
The lion and the lizard are the life of their creator, As  
are you and I and every tree and flower.  
The Body of our God is both energy and matter, As the  
ever-changing Spirit in us evolves God's power.  
Praise to the moon ...  
We live on a planet so generous with abundance, Every  
inch of it a holy sacred wonder.  
It's evolving as God's body – an expression of creation;  
we do celebrate it and won't tear it asunder.  
Praise to the moon ...*

Yes, I believe creation is the Body of God and we are the Body of Christ, and we and the earth are one. We are called to be part of making earth clean as the earth makes us clean.

An important dimension of our partnership with earth is found in the ocean. The ocean is the source of life, and it's at the center of what we call Global Warming since it's the oceans that are warming and causing Global Climate Chaos on land. Some places get hotter, some colder, some dryer, some wetter, and chaotic weather systems are generated from the warming gulf stream. So I wrote this song:

*The islands of the Celts are married to the sea.  
Together land and sea bring us all that is to be.  
The currents of the sea shape the wind and the breeze  
That blow through the grasslands and glorious verdant  
trees.  
Now we see in all the earth*

*How the ocean gives life birth  
As diverse and wondrous life is the ocean's dream.  
O the ocean is so blue  
And the sea is always true  
With the Source of life in the gulf stream.*

*When the sea is far away it still calls for you and me  
As it flows in our veins and in the sap of every tree  
So the seasons of our lives like the seasons of the seas  
Can be told in the tides and the storm and the breeze.  
Now we see in all the earth ...*

*The moon, and stars, and our planet spinnin' round  
Remind us where we are and we stand on holy ground  
For the islands of the Celts are married to the sea  
And so is every land that ever was or yet will be.*

One more song to remind us that with God's help we can do what must be done in getting clean.

*We can have clean water; We can have clean air.  
We can have good food If only we dare.  
There is enough water; There's plenty of air.  
There's enough food for all. There's enough if we share.  
The earth is a good provider; & we are a part of the earth.  
We give and receive, and we laugh and we grieve  
Through each death and in every new birth.  
The earth is our vulnerable lover;  
We take and decide how to give.  
We thank or we fuss; it is up to us;  
We abuse earth or let our earth live. (repeat first stanza)*

What's the process to get the earth clean? What's the process to allow the earth to get us clean? God has given us the resources, just as God has given us the resources for casting out all demons, healing our bodies, and cleansing the untouchables. I believe God, as the Mystery underlying all transformation, is still at work wherever God finds willing partners. I believe God – the Active and Intentional Love at the Heart of the Collective Unconscious of the Universe, still empowers the love within us to do more than we ask or think when we dare to go to the waters of the Jordan with Naaman or when we make the sacrifices like the unclean man in Mark.

Yes, we are that man, and we are the Body of Christ reaching out in every circumstance. We are part of the getting clean going on in our own lives and in the lives of everyone and everything around us – including our planet. Let's celebrate God's activity in our lives.