

Sermon 11 February 2024

Julie was middle aged and had had mental illness for much of her adult life. Sometimes she was full of hope and at other times she despaired. She was homeless, lived on the street and begged for money for food. She had been ridiculed, beaten up, ignored over the years. She attended church infrequently and felt that no one had taken the time to get to really know her. People avoided her as they either didn't know what to say or found her mannerisms challenging. It was easier to ignore her or pretend that she didn't exist. She simply wanted to be heard and understood. No one had ever built a relationship with her or asked about her life or her faith in Christ. Prior to the mental illness Julie had been a successful businesswoman managing her own business. A traumatic experience in her early life had changed everything.... resulting in many losses; family, friends, the business, and the mental illness. This woman has a lot in common with the man with leprosy that we hear about this morning.

This same woman came to Jesus and begged him on her knees, "If you are willing make me clean" she said. Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the woman. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the illness left her, and she was cleansed.

Jesus sent her away with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Instead, she went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. The woman was excited about what had occurred. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

The woman had come from a lonely place and Jesus brought her in to the world of people. Whilst Jesus went from a town full of people into a lonely place. But even so, people were still able to find him wherever he went.

What does the man with leprosy teach us? Our gospel reading contains quite a brief yet nonetheless a powerful story of the man with leprosy coming to Jesus and making

what appears at first as an unusual statement. The man says to Jesus, “If you want to, you can make me clean.” Now what is so unusual about this statement is that, for starters, it is not really a request. It is a direct statement and with attitude we might say. The man does not ‘ask’ Jesus to be ‘healed’. Instead, he announces what he believes — that, if Jesus chooses, Jesus can make him ‘clean.’ If you want to, you can do this. The man came along already believing that Jesus could do it if he wanted to.

The man’s ailment is described as ‘leprosy’ but, of course, that could have been any number of different things from cancer to mental illness. And because people feared the worst, those with leprosy had to live outside of town, apart from their family, and keep their distance from healthy people while supporting themselves through begging. Whenever those with leprosy went anywhere, they had to announce their presence by crying out, “Unclean, unclean!” Imagine that! And if you touched a leper, or were touched by one, YOU too were now unclean.

The only way these people could be cured was if a priest deemed them so. But worst of all, people equated leprosy with punishment for sin, which led to a lot of bad blood toward these people – the attitude that said, “You’re getting what you deserve”. So, while we tend to focus on the physical consequences of leprosy in Jesus’ day, the total impact of being *unclean* had religious, social, and financial dimensions as well.

The man with leprosy says to Jesus, “If you want to, you can make me clean.” It is not what we would expect. We would expect a straightforward request to be healed. Can you heal me? This says a lot about the man with leprosy. This is more of a statement about Jesus. This man obviously knew Jesus to be a healer, but more than that, he knew Jesus had the power *to choose* to make him ‘clean’. The man already knew!

So, what’s the difference between being ‘healed’ and being made ‘clean’? The man’s statement tells Jesus that he believes Jesus can heal him, yes; but more than that, he believes Jesus can restore him much more holistically; spiritually, and socially. He believes Jesus can make him whole again, return him to his family, allow him to go back to work, and back to worshipping God in the Temple. That is real and deep belief. This man wasn’t asking for mere healing, he wanted to be CLEAN! He wanted to be a whole child of God again! And that is exactly what Jesus does for him. Through a

simple touch, the man is healed of his leprosy and his place is established within the community, within his family, within the religious life of God's people.

Jesus warns him not to tell anyone and to go and show himself to the priest. It is an odd command, but Jesus does not want to be known simply as a healer. He wants people to really believe in him, regardless of his ability to heal. Nevertheless, the now ex-leper just can't contain himself and begins spreading the word about Jesus freely, to anyone who will listen! You would not want such a happening not to be shared would you!

Jesus did not want his disciples or those he healed to spread the news about him. It was not the right time for the people to hear. The right time for the news to spread was after Jesus had been executed and raised from the dead. Only then could the real purpose of God in sending Messiah be understood for what it was.

In our world today, there are many concepts about God. If we talk to 10 people on the street, we will most likely find 10 different opinions about who God is, what God is like, how God deals with humans and what God expects of us. Even among Christians, ideas about who Jesus is, what grace is and how it works, sin, forgiveness, faith, repentance, obedience and so on vary widely. How much more do ideas about Jesus vary among non-Christians? People may not even wish to engage in such conversations.

Suppose I was to approach a stranger sitting in the Square and ask him if he knows Jesus. Suppose the stranger's idea of Jesus is that of a long-haired, wispy-looking weakling. Suppose his mother used to tell him that Jesus didn't like it when he gambled. Suppose his most frequent exposure to the word Jesus was on a billboard "Do you know Jesus" placed by a motorway or a rural road.

What would be the first impression this man, this stranger, would have of me and my question? Would that promote the gospel? It might promote an angry or no response.

People listen to and take notice of friends. Those who genuinely care. Suppose on the other hand, I met the man, and over a period developed a genuine relationship with him. Suppose we became quite friendly. Suppose I was not a hypocrite and that my life and the way I treated this friend reflected the love of God. Suppose he found out, as friends usually do after a while, that I of time was a Christian. That I lived my life according to Christian principles. Would that tend to change his flawed perspective on Jesus and Christianity to a more accurate one?

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 points out that there is “a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven.” Among these are “a time to plant and a time to harvest” and “a time to be quiet and a time to speak up.” The time to spread the news about Jesus came after his resurrection, not during his ministry; until his resurrection, there could not be sufficient understanding of who he really was. Even the disciples were consistently ignorant about Jesus’ full identity and mission until after the resurrection (Mark 6:52; 8:17).

The same principle applies today — people are often not ready to hear and comprehend who Jesus is until they experience his resurrection life in his people, the church. “Be careful how you live among your unbelieving neighbours. Even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honourable behaviour, and they will believe and give honour to God when he comes to judge the world” (1 Peter 2:12, NLT). Peter does not say, “Press your unbelieving neighbours for a decision.” His focus is on believers’ “honourable behaviour.” Why? Because through our honourable behaviour, our unbelieving neighbours see the living Christ in action. Peter says this will result in their belief at a time when God chooses (“when he comes to judge the world” implies God’s timing, not ours).

“Most important of all,” Peter says, is that we “continue to show deep love for each other” (1 Peter 4:8, NLT). In a similar vein, Paul wrote, “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10).

Their instruction on evangelism centred on the witness of a godly life in Christ, not a well-rehearsed speech. It is our lives in him that show people who Jesus really is. We are all in training (1 Corin 9: 25) for the race of our lives.

Peter wrote, “you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if we are asked about our Christian hope, we should always be ready to explain it” (1 Peter 3:15, NLT). When a person asks about our Christian hope *because we live as though Christ is the Lord of our life*, then that person has a more accurate perspective of Jesus because he or she has seen Jesus in us. They ask because the Spirit prompts them, and the catalyst the Spirit uses is our godly behaviour in Christ, the Lord of our life.

And our conversation, Paul said, should be “gracious and attractive so that we will have the right response for everyone” (Colossians 4:6, NLT). People listen to friends. People listen to those who have proven they care. People listen when the relationship is authentic and genuine, not artificial.

Peter wrote: “God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another” (1 Peter 4:10). God has richly blessed us with active parts in his work of building up the body of Christ, the church, and reaching out with the gospel to nonbelievers. The greatest tool he has given us is his own life, ministered to us by the Holy Spirit and reflected in the way we live.

So back to Julie. There are many just like Julie in the world we live in. Many who come from a lonely place in a world full of people. Some of them are known to us but not their story. We need to build a genuine and authentic relationship with Julie, taking an interest in her as a person and listen to her story rather than focusing on someone with a mental illness. Who is Jesus for her and who is Jesus for us? Her belief will come at a time when God chooses. In the meantime, hang in there and develop the relationship with Julie. We will come across many like Julie as we journey with Christ. Some that only Christ will be aware of. Let’s be slow to judge and quick to love.

As we enter the season of Lent rather than give something superficial up, let us purposefully seek out those in lonely places to deepen our relationship with God and support them in their faith journey. AMEN

