

NUMBER ONE PRIORITY
Sermon for Epiphany 6 – Mk 1:40-45
LPC, 2/15/09

From my experience teaching preschool I know that many children go through a phase of wanting to be super-heroes. Often this involves going around with a towel safety-pinned around the neck so that the child feels like Superman or Batman. It stands to reason that a 3-year-old child, who is beginning to understand all the things he can and cannot do, is interested in pretending to have super powers.

It's only as we get older that we realize that having more power means having more responsibility. Power increases a person's options and actually makes things more complicated. Consider Jesus, with his supernatural powers. Two of the superhuman powers Jesus possesses, in particular, seem place him in problematic situations: his power to heal and his apparently limitless compassion. Think of it: Jesus' heart was always going to people he could heal. He was constantly being called upon to exercise his healing powers. It must have been exhausting for him.

One senses that the healing of the leper, from today's Gospel lesson from Mark, could have been one of these complicated situations.

Jesus, in his infinite compassion, allows a leper to approach him. The way the story is told emphasizes that Jesus *chooses* to heal this person, going so far as to actually touch the man, something no strictly observant Jew would do. The man is healed instantly. Jesus charges him "sternly" to observe the Jewish rituals of ceremonial cleansing, but not to tell anyone how he was healed. Unfortunately, this warning is ignored, with the result that Jesus can no longer go anywhere near a settled area without being mobbed by others desiring healing.

This story sheds light on why Jesus so often admonishes the people he's healed not to tell anyone. When word gets out of his miraculous healing powers, he can barely move. He needs things kept quiet for practical reasons.

But there's a theological reason too, for keeping things quiet. The theological reason is one of emphasis. Jesus did not come into the world specifically to heal individuals. Jesus came into the world to heal the universe. Jesus came into the world to begin to bring about the culmination of God's kingdom. This is his stated purpose. Again and again, he tells anyone who will listen, "The Kingdom of Heaven has come near." Jesus' number one priority is to announce, and begin to implement, the world's ultimate redemption.

Now of course, the healing of the universe involves the healing of individuals. And let's not forget this enormous compassion that Jesus possesses. In the Bible Jesus never turns away someone who comes for healing. He can't do it. It seems his pity goes out to whomever approaches him, whether they are "worthy" or not.

But Jesus has a larger purpose, and he cannot forget it. He cannot afford to be swamped by hordes of people seeking immediate, individual relief. He must press on to his work of redemption for all people, for all nature, for all creation. This is his number one priority.

There are two lessons I'd like to bring out of this for us today.

The first is, that while Jesus is about his number one priority of redeeming the universe, he does not neglect the healing of individuals. This tells us that no matter how grand and selfless our own ideals are, we must not neglect relationships with people that God puts in our path. When confronted with an opportunity to assist healing, we should respond to the best of our ability. When faced with a choice to heal or not heal, we should follow Jesus' example and choose to heal.

The second lesson is that Jesus' number one priority is to bring about the Kingdom of God. This is good for human beings to remember when God does not respond to our prayers as we want or expect. God's compassion is indeed infinite, but all of God's work goes toward the purpose of redeeming the universe. There are conceivably times when the fulfillment of human desires does not serve the purpose of redeeming of the universe.

For example, some of our most desperate prayers are for God to reverse the laws of nature. God sometimes does this. There are miracles. There are cases when cancers disappear, when money arrives out of the blue, when a ruptured relationship spontaneously regenerates.

But God does not always act this way. I can only suppose that God set up the universe as an orderly place, with physical laws that allow people to have expectations upon which discoveries can take place and redemption can happen. Cells grow. Actions have consequences. Love requires mutual effort. God set these principles in motion for a reason, and to violate them too often undermines God's purpose of redemption.

Another observation is that to be "made clean" does not always mean being cured. Being healed does not always mean being cured. I have sat beside more than one bed where the dying person in the bed insists that he or she has been made whole.

Jesus, in his infinite compassion, turns no one away. But Jesus, in his perfect obedience, also never forgets that his number one priority is to redeem the whole world. Neither should we.