



January 5, 2020

Sermon Series: Following Jesus to Surprising Places

Jesus' Reputation Spreads
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Mark 1:21-45 NRSV

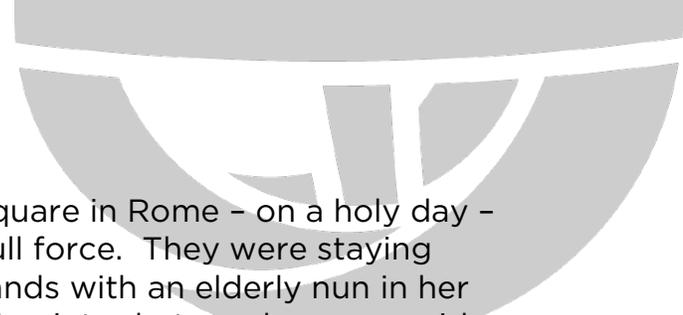
²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

²⁹As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

³²That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." ³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

⁴⁰A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." ⁴¹Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" ⁴²Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, ⁴⁴saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." ⁴⁵But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.



Pope Francis was in a holy place – St. Peter’s Square in Rome – on a holy day – New Year’s Eve. His adoring fans were out in full force. They were staying behind the rope line – mostly. Francis shook hands with an elderly nun in her black habit. He high-fived some children in their winter hats and a young girl on her father’s shoulders. Then he came upon a woman who crossed herself and folded her hands as if she were praying. Francis turned away. Just then the woman reached out and grabbed his arm. She yanked him backward and wouldn’t let go. You’ve probably seen a video clip of the incident: the pope slapped the woman’s hand and then turned away in an angry huff. Truly, it was out of character for Francis. Then again, who of us hasn’t gotten caught up in the frenzy of clamoring crowds? We’re not celebrities, of course, but we can well understand the pope’s frustration.

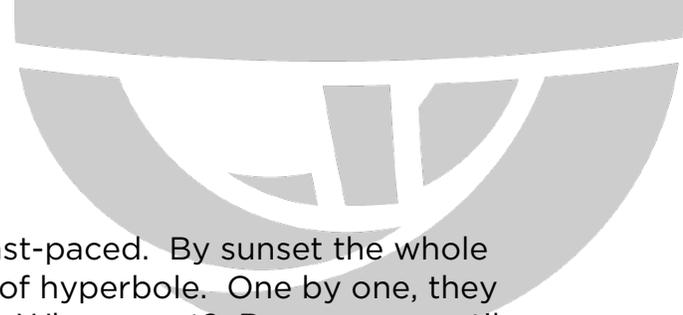
Jesus is in a holy place – the synagogue at Capernaum – on a holy day – the sabbath. He’s just beginning his public ministry. He’s been baptized in the Jordan River by John. He’s gone through a time of testing in the wilderness. He’s even managed to call a few disciples.

And now, on the sabbath, he comes to the synagogue to do pretty much what we do in church – to talk about God and study the Bible and reflect on how to live faithfully. Jesus is not as popular as Pope Francis, not yet, but it doesn’t take long for the crowd to sit up and take notice. Jesus is a good teacher. He spends less time quoting scripture and more time speaking directly to and for God. The crowd is mesmerized. They claim he’s a lot better teacher than their run-of-the-mill scribes, who are supposed to be experts in the law. I can imagine these comments stinging, especially if you’re one of those scribes. It’s not unlike telling a guest preacher that he or she is a lot more interesting than the guy who’s normally up in the pulpit.

Before you know it, Jesus comes face to face with a man possessed by an unclean spirit. What’s *he* doing in this holy place? The spirit instantly recognizes Jesus: “I know who you are. You’re the Holy One of God.” In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ true identity is known only by God and other supernatural beings. Everyone else is in the dark, at least for now. Also in Mark, Jesus’ teaching is less about words and more about action. So Jesus gets busy doing what he’s come to do: he heals the man, which in this case involves casting out the evil spirit. And even though Jesus commands the spirit to be silent, it doesn’t take long for the word to get out, and for Jesus’ fame to begin to spread.

After the synagogue service is over, Jesus goes to the home of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. She’s in bed with a fever. It’s another chance for Jesus to heal. He takes her by the hand and lifts her up. I can’t help but chuckle. Quick as a flash, Peter’s mother-in-law is out of bed and serving them falafels for lunch. A woman’s place is in the home, right?





Like many of the events in Mark, the action is fast-paced. By sunset the whole city is gathered outside the door. Mark is fond of hyperbole. One by one, they bring the sick and those possessed by demons. Why sunset? Because up until now, these events have happened on the sabbath, but with the arrival of sunset, the sabbath is over. For those who are keeping track – and good Jews are supposed to keep track – their actions in coming to Jesus would no longer be considered work. This might not seem like a big deal to us, but it was to them. As we'll soon discover, Jesus probably overstepped traditional bounds by healing on the sabbath, but the crowd has not overstepped theirs – not yet.

Jesus continues to heal and cast out demons. Again, he doesn't permit the demons to speak. Why the secrecy? It's hard to know. There are a number of possible reasons we'll explore in the coming weeks. For now, perhaps it's enough to say that, with Jesus, not everything is immediately clear. This might be Mark's way of saying to us: Keep reading!

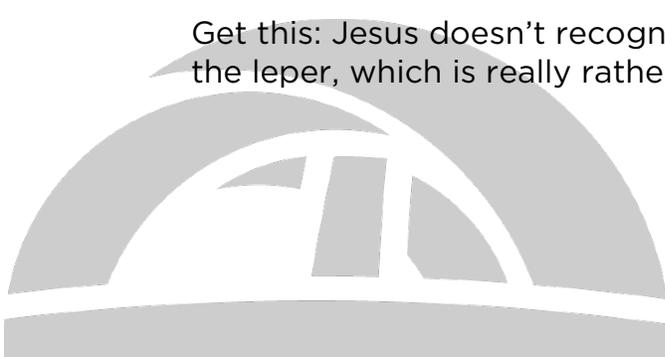
Early in the morning Jesus goes out to a deserted place to pray. After the crush of people from the night before, Jesus' pattern is to take some time for himself, to recharge his batteries and to pray. But before long, the disciples interrupt: "Rabbi, everyone is searching for you." There's a hint of weariness in Jesus' response. "Let's go," he says, "people in neighboring towns need to hear from me too."

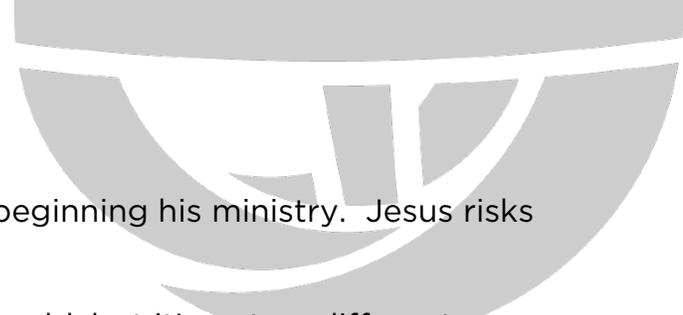
In one of those towns, Jesus is approached by a leper. The leper comes on his knees and is begging. While Jesus has already healed many who are sick, the leper is the first who comes to Jesus on his own. The word about Jesus continues to spread. As far as the leper is concerned, Jesus has what he needs.

The story of the leper is the first of several episodes in Mark in which Jesus crosses ritual boundaries. In Judaism, those boundaries are established by the Torah. The law is a way of ordering their lives. In an increasingly secular and hostile world, religious leaders are concerned with maintaining Israel's identity.

According to the Torah, lepers are out of bounds. They pose a threat to society. There's no cure for leprosy. Lepers can be cared for by charity, but they need to be confined at a safe distance outside of town. This strictness goes way beyond flu shots, way beyond face masks, way beyond hand sanitizers. And yet laws of ritual uncleanness were often intended to protect the community from spreading disease.

Get this: Jesus doesn't recognize these boundaries. He reaches out and touches the leper, which is really rather amazing because they are considered





untouchable. It's a dicey move for a rabbi just beginning his ministry. Jesus risks ritual defilement for the sake of saving a life.

Today's world isn't exactly the same as Jesus' world, but it's not so different either. We know people who've been pushed to the margins, people who are considered "unclean." More and more, it seems, we demonize those of those of differing political views. The United Methodist Church is heading toward a split over the ordination of gay clergy. Evangelicals draw a line in the sand by insisting that people must live with the gender they're assigned at birth. White nationalists claim we're created in the image of a white God, and not a God who's brown or black. American Christians regularly assert that God is on our side over against the nations of Islam. So, what do you think, is there for room for "untouchables" in our world?

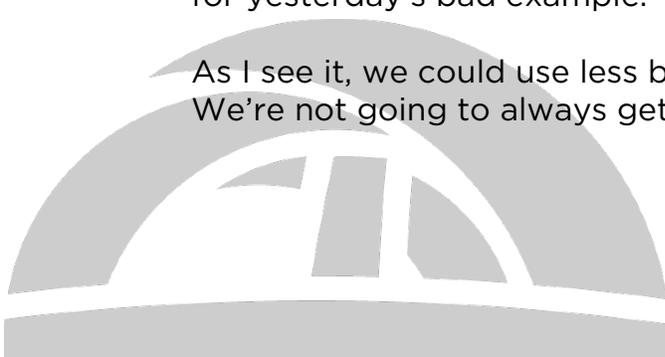
Notice that Jesus is moved with "pity" for the leper. We often understand this as compassion. If you look carefully in your Bible, though, you might find a footnote, indicating a textural variant, an alternative word in some ancient manuscripts: not "pity" or "compassion" but rather "anger" or "indignation." In other words, upon seeing the leper, Jesus gets righteously indignant.

Why? Both compassion and anger are possible in such a situation: compassion toward the disease of the leper and anger at the social structures responsible for his plight. In the chapters to come, Jesus will push up against many of those social structures.

Here's why this is important: when compassion gets substituted for righteous indignation, it often fails to move a person to action, and instead can lead to indifference. It's like saying after a school shooting, "We're so sorry," but then doing nothing to bring about change. It's watching horrifying wildfires in Australia, but then not being willing to discuss the effects of climate change. It's feeling bad about white privilege, without ever working to build bridges of understanding and peace.

Jesus likely has just as much righteous indignation as pity. The approach of the leper has been an act of faith. Because of Jesus' forceful response, the leper is changed. It's his first step in following Jesus.

The day after his encounter with the woman in St. Peter's Square, Pope Francis was contrite. He said in a homily: "Love makes us patient." Then, in an effort to apologize, he said, "So many times we lose our patience. Me too, and I apologize for yesterday's bad example." Good for him!



As I see it, we could use less bluster and more apologizing in today's world. We're not going to always get it right. As we head into a new decade, we live in a



world filled with uncertainty. It's a world on edge. Every politician, every monarch, every pope that ventures near a rope line understands that risks are lurking. There are overzealous, overexcited fans, but also crazy people intent on doing harm.

If love makes us patient, as the pope suggested, love also has its limits. Sometimes there are too many grabby hands, too many voices clamoring for our attention, too many demands on our time. That takes a toll on us. We find ourselves pushed up against our limits far too often.

That's precisely the frenzy Jesus will face as he makes his way through Galilee. Mix in some teaching with authority, and more healings and exorcisms, and Jesus will soon have all the attention he wants, and then some.

And keep in mind, there is always the possibility of danger, whether for Jesus or others. It lurks in St. Peter's Square, but it can emerge during communion at a church in Texas, or at a Hanukkah party at the home of a rabbi in New York. No sanctuary is truly safe. This makes us anxious too and further erodes our patience.

As we read through Mark's Gospel between now and Easter, we're going to hear stories of disciples following Jesus to some surprising places. Who knows where Jesus might ask them - and us - to go? Today a synagogue and a man with an unclear spirit; a woman who's sick with a fever; an early morning prayer time; an openhearted encounter with a leper. Tomorrow might bring something more.

We may think we're supposed to be going to holy places on holy days, but Jesus has more in mind for us than that. We may think that certain persons in this world are untouchable, but Jesus has other ways for us to see them. We may think the world is dangerous and uncertain, and maybe it is, but Jesus promises to go with us every step of the way.

"Come," he says, "follow me. I've got some surprising places for us to go. You won't be sorry that you did." Amen.



