"Can't Keep Quiet" – Mark 1:40-45

A Sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork, Associate Minister
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church
February 7, 2021 – Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

Gracious God, it is to your grace and love we turn in our times of need. And today, in this time of worship, we pray that your comforting and compassionate presence be felt in the lives of all your people across the world. As we ponder the story of one who was healed, let us be open to your healing Spirit and to your word to us this day. Amen.

Today and next Sunday we will be exploring two stories of healing from Mark's gospel. As I'm sure you know, the gospels are filled with various stories of Jesus healing people that he met throughout his ministry. Some of them had unclean spirits that he cast out. Some had physical sicknesses and ailments he cured. And there are even stories of Jesus bringing people back from the dead (remember the story of Lazarus in John's gospel).

These stories may raise some questions for us. That is not uncommon. We may wonder whether or not to take all of these stories literally. Or maybe we might be more comfortable focusing on the message that God brings healing and not worry so much about the mechanics of how Jesus healed. That is up to you. Varied interpretations are ok. And, as we will explore shortly, the biblical stories of healing almost always address many forms, many types of healing.

It is also common to long for our own experiences of healing when we read these stories. And we may wonder why our own experiences of illness and healing are usually more complicated than the seemingly simple and miraculous cures that fill the gospels. We can be honest about that too.

When we read these stories, it is important to remember that the ancient, pre-scientific world of the first century didn't know everything that we now know about bodies, brains, biology, chemistry, and medicine. Many of those people with unclean spirits may have been dealing with some kind of misunderstood mental or physical illness. Others, like our friend with leprosy in today's story, were lumped into a general category. He may have had leprosy (now known as Hanson's disease). Or perhaps he suffered from any number of other skin diseases like psoriasis or eczema.

But even though they didn't have all of the scientific knowledge that we have now (and are still acquiring), the people of Jesus' time knew what all people know. They knew that part of being human was to experience suffering. They knew what it was like to be sick – from minor ailments to more serious illness. They knew pain. They knew what it was like to see loved ones die. They knew grief.

And people like the man with leprosy in today's story, also knew the social stigma associated with illness and the isolation that can cause. People were afraid of catching what he had. So, they avoided him. And his own society asked him to avoid others. That was one of the expectations for someone like him. People with leprosy were asked to keep a distance and warn others not to get too close.

Some of that fear was warranted. They knew certain diseases could spread. The ancient world had more lived experience with pandemics than we do. And yet, some of this avoidance was also an overreaction and a misunderstanding. They didn't have the science to know what was contagious and what wasn't, and how different diseases spread in different ways.

And so, we can imagine the isolation this caused for many people. We can imagine how lonely this man with leprosy may have been. We might wonder how long he had been dealing with this. And what did this social stigma and isolation do to his psyche and to his soul?

And we still deal with these things today, don't we? We, as a modern culture, may not always do this intentionally, but we still tend to stigmatize people who are suffering from certain illnesses at times. Those who work in the mental health field, in particular, are always working to counteract this stigmatizing tendency and call us to better ways of understanding and talking about mental health, and better ways of walking alongside those who are dealing with various mental health issues.

And illness is still an isolating experience for many people in our time – even more so now as we have to maintain physical distance for everyone's safety. People are doing the best they can to stay connected with technology. But, as we know, this isolation has been so hard for so many people, especially for those who have had to be in the hospital and for their loved ones who can't be there with them. Thank God for the nurses, doctors, and other healthcare workers who are doing what they can to help people feel less isolated through those experiences. But it has sure been tough for a lot of folks.

Like people in every era, the people who lived at the time of Jesus longed for healing. They longed for wholeness and wellness. They longed for release and relief from their sickness and suffering. They longed for liberation from those stigmas and that isolation that accompanied their suffering. They longed for a healthy and joyful life. As we all do.

It's no wonder that people began to seek Jesus out for healing. It was one of their honest and deepest needs. At this early point in Mark's gospel, Jesus' reputation as both a great teacher and a great healer were beginning to grow, and he was gaining a following. By the time this man with leprosy showed up, he had already healed many other people in and around Capernaum, including Peter's mother-in-law. After that, he began making his way to other towns around the Sea of Galilee, teaching and healing in the synagogues.

And in one of those towns, this man with leprosy approaches him. "If you choose, you can make me clean," he says. Mark says Jesus is "moved with pity" and so he does what social

convention has told him *not* to do and he touches him. "I do choose," Jesus says. "Be made clean!" And he's healed.

And then Jesus sends the man off to the priest. And there is a reason for that. The priest is the one who has to verify his healing and proclaim that he has been made clean. And then the man would also make an offering as an act of gratitude for his cleansing, in accordance with the laws of Moses.

Sometimes these ancient customs and rituals may seem a little foreign to us modern readers. But we should try to understand that Jesus is respecting the practices and conventions of his culture and religious tradition here. And this act of going to the priest is the first step by which this man who has been isolated by his illness will begin to reconnect with his community.

But Jesus also tells him to keep this to himself. Only go tell the priest. Don't tell anyone else. What should we make of this?

On one hand, it's a practical request. Once word spreads about this healing, Jesus can no longer go into town without being bombarded by people. So, he ends up staying out in the country where people have to make their way to him.

On the other hand, this is also a feature of the Gospel of Mark. In the way Mark tells the story, many times throughout the gospel Jesus asks his disciples and others to keep quiet, at least for now. In due time will his identity as the Messiah, God's anointed one, will be revealed to all.

But, in this episode, this request to keep silent also helps move the story along and give it meaning, precisely because the man does the opposite. This man is asked to keep his experience of healing on the down low. But bless his heart, he can't keep quiet. How can he? I don't blame him. This probably painful condition he's been enduring for who knows how long has been healed. This weight, this burden, that he's been carrying has been lifted. He can't keep quiet. He's got to share his good news. And he does – with just about everyone he meets, perhaps. He can finally again be a part of a community. And his ability even to share this good news with those he meets is part of his healing.

As I mentioned, healing stories in the Bible generally have multiple dimensions. This man was healed physically, socially, and spiritually. His physical illness was cured. He was reconnected with his community. And the burden he has been carrying in his soul, in his spirit, has been lifted. Of course, he has to share this good news.

And so maybe part of the point of this story is that the good news has to be shared. Nothing should prevent this man from sharing his joy and proclaiming his faith. He has experienced liberation and healing and shares his joyful experience with gratitude. And, as a result of his sharing, others might find liberation and healing in their lives as well.

There is certainly something inspiring about this man's enthusiasm. I like to imagine him joyfully going through town, popping into every market stall and shop, and saying hi to everyone he meets on the road, as he reconnects with his community. And though he probably did go see the priest, he is also subverting the expectation that he needs someone else to proclaim that he is clean and can therefore re-enter society. Instead, he makes that proclamation for himself. I like that.

And we can learn a few things about honest faith from this man. He approaches Jesus as any of us can approach God in prayer. He is honest about his suffering and asks for help. He exhibits gratitude. And he shares his good news in a positive way. And he seems to be a pretty effective evangelist because all sorts of people start seeking Jesus out.

You know, evangelism is one of those words that makes many moderate and progressive people of faith nervous. Evangelism has gotten a negative reputation for a lot of reasons. For too long evangelism has been equated with coercion, manipulation, and even bullying. For too long evangelism has been predominantly associated with more rigid forms of religion that draw very clear lines about who's in and who's out and what one must believe to belong.

And so, I wonder can we reclaim evangelism? Is there a place for evangelism in the lives of those of us who don't want to be so pushy (who don't feel that's helpful or ethical), for those of us who don't subscribe to a very rigid system of belief, for those of us who value communities of faith like ours where questions, and doubts, and differences in interpretation and perspective are honored and respected, where open dialogue is encouraged?

I think there is. I think there is a place for evangelism, especially when we think about it at its very basic level as simply sharing our good news, sharing our experience of faith – not to put any pressure on anyone else, but to simply be honest about who we are and how faith is part of our lives. I used to be a little hesitant about this. And then I became a pastor. And now it's part of my job.

I remember several years ago, I got on a plane to travel to Colorado to visit my parents. And I sat down next to a friendly older man who asked what I did for a living. I was probably tired and perhaps not feeling up to a long conversation (I'm usually that person who has her nose in a book or a magazine on a plane). So, I confess, I had a moment where I considered fudging the truth a bit and telling him I was a teacher. Not untrue, but not the whole truth either. But I ended up going with the whole truth and telling him that I was a pastor. As it turned out, he loved that. And he did want to talk. And though I was a little tired, it was great. I don't remember all of the details of our conversation, but I know he told me about how his faith had carried him through some tough times in his life. And neither one of us would have made that connection if we hadn't been honest with each other.

Like the man who was healed by Jesus, we too have good news to share. We too have stories of healing (whether physical, emotional, social, spiritual, or some combination of

those things). We too have experiences of transformation and growth. We too have experiences of how God's love and the love of community has carried us through a tough time.

There is great value in sharing our experiences. And connections can be made that can enhance our lives and the lives of others. Sometimes those connections are deep and long-lasting. Sometimes those connections are brief, but still quite meaningful.

And not all of our sharing has to be about the good stuff. There is also great value in sharing our troubles with others who are there to listen with compassion and be of support. That's part of being the church with and for one another. And the act of simply sharing can bring some relief, can bring some healing, even if it doesn't fix our problems.

There is also strength to be found in vulnerability, in honestly sharing our real feelings with trusted friends and with God. And, though it takes courage and isn't always comfortable, our relationships can be strengthened, and new relationships can be formed when we honestly share what is on our hearts. The man with leprosy exhibited this strength and courage when he asked Jesus for help. And it brought him healing on several levels.

One of the questions this story challenges us to consider is how to counteract the various stigmatizing and isolating forces that are at work in the world. We may not be able to heal exactly like Jesus did. But, nevertheless, we are all called to be healers in our own ways.

And so, we can't keep quiet. Not really. It doesn't mean we all have to be public evangelists. But perhaps it does mean that each of us should consider how our unique story of faith, our particular experiences and learnings, can be of service to others.

Perhaps being honest and open about both our wounds and our experiences of healing can help bring greater compassion and healing into to the wounded places in our world.

And maybe then more people like the man in today's story won't feel so alone to begin with, won't feel so isolated in their suffering, and will find healing of their own.

Amen.