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“Wash and Be Clean”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

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Mark 1:40-45; 2 Kings 5:1-14

Two weeks ago I suggested in a sermon from this pulpit that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is astonishing. Come to church expecting to be astonished by the God made known to us in Jesus Christ. To be astonished means to stand in amazement and wonder. I stand by that claim.

This morning I want to suggest that the Proclamation of the Gospel elicits another response, which has a positive and a negative side. Let’s start with the negative side. The reading of God’s Word often elicits embarrassment. “Do not embarrass me,” my children used to say to me. They still do! None of us likes to be embarrassed.

If you listen carefully to the Gospel, you are in danger of experiencing embarrassment. These stories that we have the audacity to read in public, before God, before our children, before anyone else that will listen, it can be embarrassing.

Like the lesson we heard this morning from Hebrew Scripture. A leading figure in Syria a respected military commander, he is honored by all. He is a man of power and prestige. He has everything going for him, except one thing. He has a terrible disease. He has leprosy. It not only affected your body but you it made you a social outcast. You were quarantined.

Anyone here besides me old enough to remember quarantine signs? When someone had a contagious disease like measles, chicken pox or whooping cough, it was reported to the health department. They sent you to quarantine with a sign. The sign was to warn people to stay away. It was serious business. I remember the excitement in our home when one child got one of those diseases and had to be quarantined. We all knew the rest of us would

eventually get it. It was not all bad though as you had to miss school and received a lot special attention.

Quarantine was a cultural response to perceived danger. Like many people were treated HIV_AIDS, we set them aside, “Do not touch.” “Do not get near.” Lepers were isolated and traveled in groups. When they entered a city they had to ring a bell and shout, “Unclean, unclean”.

This well connected powerful man has this terrible disease. He wants to be cured so he goes to those like him in power. Powerful people go to the powerful for help. An embarrassing part of the story is that an indentured servant, a young woman who has been captured from Israel, says to Naaman’s wife, “If he wants to be healed he should go and see the prophet in Israel.”

Naaman goes to the powerful king, the king does not know how to talk prophets, so he sends a letter to the king of Israel. The king of Israel is dumfounded. He can not cure leprosy and wonders if this is an attempt to start a fight. Then he remember Elisha. So Naaman finally he goes to the prophet Elishia. He pulls up in his chariot like a caravan with lights and sirens in a motorcade escort with motorcycles. He steps from his limousine and expects an instant cure.

But Elisha does not come out and sends word to him to go and wash seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman was so upset. Have you seen the River Jordan? It is not a wide impressive river. It is in fact a dinky little stream. This important man was not impressed. He was not in favor of washing in the Jordan River. It seemed embarrassing to be cleaned up in this river. He would have been more in favor of a dip in a pool by the Hanging Gardens of Babylon or some exotic salve imported from Ethiopia. Once again the servant convinced him to do what the prophet asked if he wanted to be healed. Another embarrassment, it is not the powerful people but the every day people who get the message.

None of us likes to be told: “Wash and be cleaned.” I had a friend who was in her 40’s when she went to have dinner with her mother. As she sat down at her mother’s table, her mother asked her: “Did you wash your hands?” “Did I what?” she responded, “I am 40 years old.” Then she went and washed her hands!

Like the ruler we are ready to walk away. Not on your life would we do this. But he does what Elisha suggests and so must we. What an embarrassing story.

Then he wants to do what people in power know to do, he wants to reward Elisha with a gift. Like the man running through the hospital saying, "I am a rich man, my wife is sick, here is some money to make her well." The nurses say, "Sir, we are doing all we can, it is not about money."

Elisha says he does not want a gift and then Naaman has a true change of heart. The power of God works in him. He turns and begins to worship God Almighty. He realizes that his healing is a gift and the proper response to a gift is to be grateful. There are many things money can not buy. We can not direct others what to do with our money but when they give us a gift, when they call us to be apart of God's community the only response it to say, "Thank you." Thank you with our words and with our lives. He devoted himself to serving God.

What is going on here? It seems so counter culture, the lowly get it while the powerful with all they have at their disposal can not get it. It is enough to make you embarrassed.

Someone said that this story is the richest Old Testament story of baptism and anticipates Christian baptism. The Gospel lesson was a similar embarrassing story. A man has leprosy and he has the audacity to interrupt Jesus and to say:

"If you choose, you can make me clean."

The text says Jesus was moved with pity. That could mean two things, it could mean he was moved with compassion for a man who was suffering with this terrible disease. Or it could mean he was angry, "Why do people have to suffer like this?" Jesus was moved with compassion, with anger, with concern and he healed the man.

In a few moments we shall observe the sacrament of baptism. It is a time when we all come to this font and say that we need to be washed and made clean. We take the water and consecrate it and put it on the heads of two little girls and a young man. Then we say, "You have been claimed by Christ, you are his forever, your sins are forgiven, go and live as forgiven

people.” That is embarrassing for those of us who think we are self made people and can wash and clean ourselves, thank you very much.

Are we really made clean and whole by this sacrament called baptism? Not really, but really.

God has the power to remove our quarantine sign. You may be isolated by something that has happened to you, it may be personal. You may feel isolated by social prejudice about race or sexuality. Someone who betrayed you or a community that let you down or disappointed you, maybe you experienced a failed relationship. Moved by compassion, by anger, by concern Jesus reaches across the isolation and brings us back into community. Out of love, out of hope for our future, Jesus reached out and touched him.

Because Jesus reached out and touched this man is the reason that the church of Jesus Christ exists. Into our separateness, our isolation, our brokenness comes one who stretches his hand across all the barriers and empty spaces to restore us and to claim our lives in his service and to place us in a community of God’s people.

I said there was another side to this response of embarrassment. The other side of embarrassment, the positive side, is humility, walking humbly with our God.

This week we celebrated the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln separated in birth by one day. They were remarkable leaders, one a president and one a scientist men of faith who both walked humbly with God. Darwin knew what he did not know as one writer said about him. He was humble with his scientific research, in face of the fact that he did not have all the evidence. He did not have it all figured out. He was not smarter than God. Abe Lincoln not only a great president and leader but also a wonderful theologian. A story is told that one time during the Civil War a man shouted out to him, “President Lincoln, God is on our side.” Lincoln responded, “Sir, my humble prayer is that I will be found on the side of God.”

Walk humbly with your God because you healing, you restoration is a gift, a gift that you did not earn, did not deserve. It is a gift that is given to you out of the love of God, a love that will not let you go.

These two men and us, when we are at our best, realize that we are human beings standing in the need of grace and prayer and community and we are not God. “Wash and be clean.” It may seem embarrassing, but it is very humbling.

So let us remember our baptism with humility. The water has the power to restore, to redeem, to renew us. We can be healed and we like Naaman, like the leper that Jesus healed can learn together what it means to walk humbly with our God. Let it be so among us. Amen.