

6th Sunday after Epiphany
February 12, 2012

Text: Mark 1:40-45

Theme: Jesus is with them!

A religious cult located in New South Wales, Australia, called Infinity, has sold quite a few bottles of spring water for \$80 each, claiming it cures everything from weak hearts, migraines and anxiety to drug dependence. Included in the 270 Infinity-brand “elixirs” are Heart Spider, Hallucinogenic Elixir and Puff the Magic Dragon. Infinity claims people can take the bottles away, drink the water, refill the bottle with tap water and still get the product’s healing powers. But there is a catch — the healing powers only last for two or three refills of tap water before they run out, at which point the consumer has to fork over \$80 for a new supply! Would you buy a bottle for \$80?

Several years ago Evangelist Leroy Jenkins, had a revival at the Charlotte Convention Center. Jenkins wanted to give out bottles of water (for a hefty donation of course,) which he said came from a well on his property in Delaware, Ohio. Back in 1977 God told him to drill a well 100 feet deep. Water from this well had miraculous healing powers. There was only one problem – the water was contaminated with coliform bacteria. The Ohio Department of Agriculture had to order Jenkins to stop distributing the contaminated water,

Do you believe water can have miraculous healing power – you just have to get the right kind of water? I’m guessing most of us are pretty skeptical about such claims, not just the ones about water, but about miracle healings in general. Our life experiences have shown us that miraculous healings don’t always take place. What do we do with those realities in the midst of these stories about healings? That those things happened back then – in Biblical times – sure the prophet of Elisha could heal a man of leprosy by having him wash in the Jordan river and all Jesus had to do was reach out and touch the man – but not so much today. So why bother to read these stories – don’t they just cause us to wonder or even get a bit resentful – why can’t we have more miraculous healings? We could use more of those for the people we know and love.

In our gospel I think there is something more going on here than just a story about a miraculous healing. First of all, Jesus is moved with pity – a stronger word would capture the meaning better. Jesus is upset, agitated, even angry. Then he reaches out and touches the leper, which automatically makes Jesus unclean, and says – “not be healed,” but “be made clean.” This

story is about barriers (barriers between clean and unclean) and shows us clearly that Jesus is on the other side with them. And that is the theme of my sermon today – Jesus is with them!

In our gospel, the leper comes up to Jesus and begs Jesus to make him “clean” – not make me healthy; make me clean. For as you may know, in that culture leprosy was a disease that put a person outside the community; that made them unclean and there was a clear distinction between those things and persons who were clean (acceptable, in) and those persons who were unclean (unacceptable, out). So on top of having a terrible disease (I don’t know the physical pain and anguish associated with leprosy – did you know that armadillos are the only animals that get leprosy besides humans? I don’t know what that has to do with anything but I thought it was an interesting bit of trivia.) But anyway, on top of just having the disease and having to deal with disease, a person with leprosy was put outside the community because they were now unclean.

Could it be that this cruel exclusion, this sharp defining line between clean and unclean, this pushing people in need to the outskirts of society so the “clean” people didn’t have to deal with them was what moved Jesus to pity or as I said earlier, indignation, and even anger? Is that why Jesus stretched out his hand – beyond and through that barrier that separated the man from everyone else – and touched him? Now we may see that as a nice gesture – Jesus touching a man who is ill – but it is actually a radical act of defiance against this system that places the barrier there in the first place. Because by touching the man with leprosy, a man who is a social outcast, Jesus immediately becomes unclean himself. Wow – Jesus has now put himself on the side of the social outcasts, the unclean, the ones on the edge of society. Jesus then instructs the man to “go, show yourself to the priest . . . as a testimony to them” or is it “against” them? Chad Meyers in his Biblical commentary on this text argues that Jesus’ instructions need not be interpreted as a corroboration of the Levitical code (the lines that are drawn between clean and unclean) but as a form of assault on the code’s injustice. Jesus sends the man to the priest in order that he may provide witness over and against a system that has isolated him from contact with members of his community, a system that moves those who are suffering outside the boundaries of society. So the point of this healing story is not that healing miraculously occurs with a touch from Jesus but to press the issue of injustice with religious leaders who uphold the

laws in ways that violate God's mercy for those who are sick and weak. Now that's a different way of looking at this story – isn't it?

One of my theology professors in seminary used to say – Be careful when you draw a line between people – us and them; worthy and unworthy; successful and unsuccessful – because Jesus is always on the other side with them! Could it be that this is what our gospel story is really about – which makes it very powerful and relevant to us today? For while we no longer talk about clean and unclean according to a purity codes, we continue to put up barriers and dividing lines. In recent times there were questions as to whether children with AIDS could attend public school because they might infect their classmates even though we knew AIDS was not spread through casual contact. Homeless people who struggle with addiction and mental illness are often deemed invisible, if not disposable. We don't want them in our cities, negatively affecting businesses. The children of undocumented workers should not be allowed to pay in state tuition to colleges. They aren't one of us. We have our own set of purity codes that define who is in, who is out; who is worthy, who is not; who is welcomed to fully participate and who is pushed to the margins of society. And the reality of all the barriers we put up and the lines we draw is that Jesus is always on the other side with them!

Percy Wooton, the president of the American Medical Association, tells the story of a very poor neighborhood where a doctor named "Doctor Ray" worked. Part of his practice was the treatment of the neediest of the needy. He did this even though they, more often than not, were unable to pay him. To make himself more accessible to these indigent people, Dr. Ray set up his office where it could be reached by private staircase, without fear of disclosure. He did this to spare his patients the ordeal of checking in and being noted as charity cases. And for directions to this upstairs haven, there was just a simple plaque, bearing only these words: 'Dr. Ray is up there.' But those few words spoke volumes about this doctor's willingness to serve. When this noble and generous healer at last passed away, his patients wanted to memorialize him with a bronze plaque on his tomb. But, of course, their money wouldn't go that far. So, in a moment of inspiration, above the grave they placed the sign that had hung outside the door of his office: 'Dr. Ray is up there.' Dr. Ray is up there."

Maybe it is not a matter of WWJD – what would Jesus do, but WWJB – where would Jesus be. Jesus' identity with the outcasts, with them, gives us a picture of ministry for those

who profess to follow in his path. The church as the body of Christ is called to the ministry of healing, to the prophetic witness of exposing injustice, and the messy work of accompanying those who find themselves in deserted places. We don't come and do all we do in the church – all that wonderful volunteering that we are so very grateful for – so that we can have bigger and more successful programs, a bigger budget, or even a place where we can personally improve our own lives – the interpretation of the gospel as a modern self-help manual. Do all these things and you will be healthy, happy, and successful. We do what we do for the sake of others, for the sake of the world so that we can gather and experience the healing power of the Word and Meal to be sent out to act with justice for all, including the poor, the hurting, the isolated.

That is not easy work and there is no magic water we can drink that will miraculously fix everything and make it easier. But there is water – the waters of our baptism – that infuses us with the spirit of Jesus, bringing healing deep within to our fears and scars; and there is a meal in which Jesus himself stretches out to embrace and touch all of us with his presence. How miraculous is that? Jesus not only touching us, but in us and calling us to be his presence in the world and stand with him and with them! And it doesn't even cost you \$80 a bottle! Amen