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“Too Good to Hide”

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In the process of writing this sermon I have come across a word which one of my Bible commentaries lifts up from the lesson in Mark’s gospel. You are going to love this word. I have practiced saying it several times, and now I am going to teach it to you.

*Splanchnizomai*. Repeat after me: *splanchnizomai*. Very good! You have just learned the word for ‘being moved with pity’ or ‘moved with compassion’ in Biblical Greek. You have said out loud the word for the deep and motivating sensation which (according to Mark) Jesus had in his belly and in his mind when confronted by a man with leprosy who said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.”

*Splanchnizomai* is how Jesus felt and acted when a man approached him with a challenge, received his healing touch, and then immediately departed to DISOBEY the one thing Jesus told him to do. According to Mark, Jesus pronounced the man’s cleanness; he made all signs of disease leave the man’s body; then Jesus told the man he should reveal to no one what had happened. Instead, Jesus instructed him to go straight to the temple priest to get his new health confirmed “legally.”

We cannot know what Jesus had in mind with that instruction. Bible scholars refer to the “messianic secret” which Jesus sometimes wanted to keep under wraps in the early parts of the gospels. It seems Jesus was not yet ready for the public nature of his ministry. He sometimes told the recipients of his healing and his transformative intervention in their lives not to tell anyone what had happened. But over and over again, whenever Jesus healed or preached or ate with people the word spread. **The “messianic secret” was just too good a secret to keep.** And the healing of a man with leprosy was public news that was way too good for the man to keep quiet about. It took him about 60 seconds to begin spreading the word.

And really, you do have to ask: what was Jesus thinking? Of course people would tell! Of course the word would spread! Even if people actually obeyed Jesus following their healing, and went to the priests “as testimony to them” ... well, that testimony would NOT remain under wraps. That’s because *splanchnizomai* is something which always gets out. When people are moved with compassion and mercy, and when they reach out to pull in the ones who have been cast into the outer darkness because of disease or uncleanness, news of that kind of behavior will always spread. To some it will be scandalous. To some it will be confusing. To those who are touched with its healing power, it will be news that is far too good to keep quiet about.

Today I am preaching about the healing power of Jesus. I am preaching about the healing power of the Christian community. In working with this passage of Mark’s gospel, I began with thoughts about physical healing, and I have ended up with thoughts about same sex marriage. Now, it’s possible that statement may give you a little case of whiplash ... simply because the line connecting those dots probably seems pretty faint. So let me tell you how this NT story of healing connects in my mind ideas I have been thinking about in relationship to with the healing power of same sex marriage for those who love each other and are of the same sex.

To be clear, I am not saying Mark the gospel writer or Jesus the healer were thinking about same sex marriage in this passage. But hear me out, and give some thought to an issue which is under vigorous debate in our culture and which is deeply important to so many of us here today.

As you know, the legislature of Washington State has recently passed a law to permit same sex marriage. The State of Washington has done this on the basis of equality for all under the laws of the state. To the south, an appellate court decision has recently done the same thing in California, by declaring that Proposition 8 was flawed when it took away rights which previously had been granted for the marriage of same sex partners. Because of these two decisions, great joy has followed among many who care deeply about marriage equality. Both of these developments have resonated with the *splanchnizomai* of those who long to embrace for themselves and for others the chance to create lifelong, public bonds of love, commitment and responsibility. We call it marriage. It has the ring of something deeper than simply a legal arrangement. It sounds beautiful. It sounds good. It sounds like love.

But you may wonder, why does this passage from the healing ministry of Jesus relate in my mind to the behavior of legislators and judges in Washington and California? The two things are connected for me for this reason. In New Testament times, disease (and especially leprosy) operated not only to cause unavoidable illness and pain, but it also avoidably but inevitably, disease operated to cast people outside the circle of human community and outside religious participation. People who were sick were considered unclean. Other people didn't want to be near them because touching their blood or their wound or even the things they had touched would make the healthy people unclean, too. If they were unclean, religious rules prescribed they couldn't legally worship in the fullest measure. They would have to go through extensive purification rituals to re-purify themselves after exposure to leprosy. The trouble was, you could never really get ahead of the curve of "contamination and "re-purification" if you actually lived with and ate with and took care of someone with leprosy or bleeding.

This attitude is similar to what has happened for gay and lesbian people for so very long. Ignorance, cultural prejudice, theological attitudes, active hostility and timid silence have so often resulted in violence, isolation, judgment, and a very harmful condemnation of unworthiness before God for gay and lesbian people. The term we have come to use is that gays and lesbians have lived "in the closet" ... in secret isolation of their true selves. Another phrase which describes a life of isolation is "don't ask, don't tell." It adds up to a demand that people who are gay are asked (or used to be asked) to structure their lives around hiding and deceit.

In the NT it's sick people who need to stay far away from human community and from public worship. (And I promise you, there were plenty who tried to hide their illness so that no one would know and so they could remain with their families and come to worship like anyone else.) But into this picture of NT hostility toward the 'unclean,' and also in the context of historic hostility toward gays and lesbians, comes that word we are learning today for our vocabulary lesson: our new favorite word, *splanchnizomai*.

We have learned to become moved by compassion. We are learning (as recent news reveals) to summon this motivating force within us ... a motivating force which Jesus displays over and over again in the pages of the NT ... we are summoning that compassion and the energy behind that compassion, to PULL PEOPLE IN. In doing that we do what Jesus did when he pulled in the man with leprosy, and through the power of healing, provided a way for that man to re-enter human community and loving relationships.

Jesus Freak is a book written by Sara Miles. I have quoted her before, especially in reference to her work feeding the hungry through St. Gregory of Nyssa Church of San Francisco. But Sara Miles does more than just start food banks. She writes that Jesus not only gives us the power to feed the hungry; Jesus also sends us out, and gives us power to heal the sick and raise the dead! She tells about healing and resurrection she has participated in, by way of compassion, truth telling, human touch, and faith in God's love.

The passage from her book which is our Witness of the Spirit lesson for today suggests the difference between curing versus healing illness. Miles does not claim (for example) that we in the church know how to cure the blind of their inability to see. Despite our most sincere prayers and God's love, we do not have the power reliably to effect that cure of physical blindness. However, Sara Miles points out we can and often do pull those who are blind or sick or alone or deeply troubled into a community which is spacious enough for them to be healed. She claims we can create a space for the ill, the outcast, the dejected, the irritating, the troublesome and the arrogant. In other words, there is space for us all. And in the embrace we experience as the community of Jesus Christ, we are all healed.

Sara Miles is eloquent in her insistence that not only CAN we do this, but (more to the point), we are REQUIRED to do this. This is the commission we have as the Body of Christ in the world. This is our commission in the church. It is also our duty and our calling to do the work of creating ripples of our *splanchnizomai* spread far beyond the church and into the public arena too.

Now, far be it for me to claim the church has been ahead of the curve when it comes to honoring and loving and accepting and affirming those whom society has cast beyond the pale. When it comes to the sick and the poor, the outcast and the rejected, gay people, racial minorities, free thinkers, recent immigrants ... you name it, the list goes on and on ... I can't claim the church has been ahead of the curve in our embrace and welcome to all these categories.

Yet, at our best, we have, indeed, worked to embrace the glowing, indestructible heart of Jesus, and who Jesus calls us to be. The inner tug of compassion which made Jesus reach out to those who were victims of leprosy, or bleeding, or were women, or Gentiles, or prostitutes or tax collectors ... the inner tug of compassion has always taught us that these are the ones we have been called to touch and to welcome and to love. The inner tug of compassion has, indeed, inspired churches to build hospitals and schools, to work

on behalf of voting rights and public access, to lobby in favor of civil rights and now, in our day, in many cases, to honor marriage equality for gay and lesbian people.

I don't say we have been ahead of the curve. But I do say we have tried to catch up to the imperatives of human need and divine commands. We are learning how to choose (as the man with leprosy begged Jesus to do) to pull people in. As Sara Miles suggests, we are uniquely able and we are required to create a way of life which allows the deepest desire of our hearts to draw us to health. We are learning how our faith can make us and also others well ... whole ... honest ... healed.

I will say our new word one more time. *Splanchnizomai* is the kind of inner glow which Jesus portrayed; upon which Jesus took action; and which Jesus offers to us as his followers. It needs to be the hallmark of the church. The pull and the push toward compassion is what marks us. The pull and the push toward healing love and loving truthfulness are what mark us.

We are not marked by our purity; everyone has a different definition of what is pure, and some definitions are downright mean. We are not marked by our goodness; we know too much about our own failures to ever claim that. If we are marked at all in the church, let us be marked by the compassion which has been placed within us by God's loving grace. Let us be marked by the way that compassion spills out in the shape of our lives and our church community.

Let the church say Amen.