A BHAG Challenge:
To be healed & empowered. To get up & share.

Sermon by Pastor Paul J. Olson

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Luke 17:11-19
St. Mark’s Lutheran Church, Aurora, IL

In the classic old movie *Shenandoah*, Jimmy Stewart plays a hardened farmer who works his land and looks after his family. He does not have much of a religious sense, but his wife has a deep abiding faith. He promises her, as she lay dying, that he will have table grace before each meal. And so each day he would pray:

> Lord, we came here and cleared the trees. We took out the stones. We broke the sod. We prepared the fields and sowed the seed. We tended the crops and fought pestilence and weathered the storms and drought, but we thank you anyway. Amen.

The Gospel reading today gives us such a contrasting picture. Ten lepers see Jesus as he crosses the border between Samaria and Galilee. Lepers were the scourge of the land. This is not the Hansen’s disease we know as leprosy today. This disease was an illness that ostracized anyone who had it.

Leprosy first appears as nodules on your skin that grow larger until they form deep wrinkles all over your body. Then your lips, nose, and ear lobes grow thicker until your face resembles an animal’s. You have ulcers everywhere that cause your arms and legs to be horribly mutilated. You start losing your fingers and toes as the disease progresses until you are left blind. And your blindness is not just physical but socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

The social stigma of leprosy in Jesus’ time was horrible. You had to wear clothes that made you look as if you were dead. You kept your face veiled, and everywhere you went, you had to cry, “Unclean Unclean!” in order to warn others from getting near to you. You had to live in caves or pits outside of town. You spent your days begging for food and your nights waiting to die.

It is not difficult to see the parallels between leprosy in Jesus’ day and issues in our own time. Years ago a woman called the church office where I was a pastor and asked if I would pray for her son. “Is there a particular concern?” I asked. The mother replied, “He has AIDS. And this is the fifth church I have called. The first two hung up on me, the next one said no, and the fourth said he would not pray for someone with AIDS.” I took her name, her son’s name, and put him on our prayer list and invited them to worship.
Tragedy creates community. Community develops among many that never see themselves as being connected. Certainly the nine Jews and one outcast Samaritan in the Gospel reading never saw themselves in community. But their tragedy created community.

Tragedy can also create a common enemy. Likewise, fear and prejudice can create a common enemy. We can ban together for the good. But we can and we see today there are those who unite against others unlike themselves. They have evil reasons, and they spout their hate and degradation. They isolate others, cast them out, and call them all kinds of degrading names. They claim that these “others” are the wretched unclean outcasts of the earth. The people filled with prejudice might think they see the truth. But, ironically, there are times the outcast sees clearer than our passions allow us. Emotion blurs the picture that the distance of the outcast clarifies. Sometimes the outcast has a vision that our prejudice hides. Jesus encountered such an outcast on his way to Jerusalem.

Jesus turns to the Samaritan and commands, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well” (Luke 17:19). Now we understand the story. Its importance lies in the mission of the Church, whose message of healing and wellness to a sin-sick world is being rejected by Jesus’ own people. At the same time outsiders—lepers and Samaritans, the pariah of society who are seen as downright aliens—are responding to the Good News. Jesus does not praise the Samaritan for his good manners. Jesus does hold up the Samaritan as an example of how faith works among those who refuse to cling to the illusion that they are the privileged people or that they have a right to their “slice of life.” The nine cured lepers would rush home to their families. But the one was healed. There is a difference between being cured and being healed.

The word for “get up” is the same word in Greek that is used for the meaning of resurrection. The command surely means for the man to get up from Jesus’ feet. But it also implies that the man “get up,” be transformed, be changed, move on in life. This story is not just an example story. Gratitude and giving thanks is the point of the story, but this is not about etiquette. It is all about being well.

Jesus brought new life, resurrected life, wellness to this one outcast leper. Jesus brought healing and salvation, which is the opposite of disease. Jesus did not just cure him; Jesus healed him. Disease is dis-ease; a loss of wellbeing. Some of you are well familiar with the four dimensions of dis-ease.

There is bodily dis-ease that affects our physical wellbeing. There is personal dis-ease that affects our emotional wellbeing and relationships with others. There is spiritual dis-ease that affects how we relate to God and how we see God in our lives. There is social dis-ease that affects how we make connections and friendships in our world. All of these types of dis-ease are the opposite of wellness.

Jesus’ healing of the leper was for the whole person. We all have known folks whose bodies are ravaged by physical dis-ease but who are a joy and inspiration to those
around them. We all have known folks who have great mobility issues but make us seem like the ones with the dis-ability.

A psychologist by the name of Larry Scherwitz found that people who are what he calls “self-absorbed” have more severe coronary artery disease than those who are more focused toward others.

Scherwitz studied 150 patients hospitalized either for suspected heart disease or after a heart attack. He monitored how often they used the pronouns “I, me, my, mine or myself.” He found that patients with more severe disease made far more references to themselves, no matter their age, blood pressure, or Type A behavior. [1]

One of the best things we can do for ourselves is to stop putting ourselves as the focus of life. There is a reason why the letter “I” is the middle letter in the word “sin.”

In their influential book *Built to Last*, James Collins and Jerry Porras coined the term BHAG. BHAG describes a bold, well-nigh impossible vision. B-H-A-G stands for “Big Hairy Audacious Goal.” Common sense would tell you that BHAG would intimidate many people and discourage them from trying. But BHAG’s are paradoxical. The idea of attempting the impossible is so exciting and energizing that organizations usually experience an upsurge of motivation when a leader presents a BHAG to the people.

An example in history would be Abraham Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation or President Kennedy’s challenge of putting a man on the moon. In the history of this congregation, a BHAG could be seen as when, in 1959-1960, the congregation made a decision to plant a church called St. Mark’s on the corner of Edgelawn and Galena. Or when a second sanctuary and educational facility was built. Or when a third sanctuary was built. This congregation has had many BHAGs.

Today I would like to challenge you with a BHAG, a new Big Hairy Audacious Goal. I would challenge you to dream, to aspire, to strive for the best response we can make for the mission and ministry of St. Mark’s in 2020.

Wouldn’t it be great to know that, because of your response in this next year, people are becoming well in their lives?

Wouldn’t it be powerful to know that, because of your response, we can work even more successfully in living out the Five Vision Priorities of St. Mark’s for children, youth, and adults?

Wouldn’t it be a tremendous statement that, because of your response, we can have a focus in our community and in our congregation on outreach and in-reach and discipleship so that others who do not know or haven’t felt the urgency of the message of the Gospel can be invited to share and celebrate in God’s love?
Wouldn’t it be great to know that, because of your response, you can welcome a new Senior Pastor to St. Mark’s and that pastor will walk into a deeply committed, strongly encouraging and faithfully worshipping congregation?

Wouldn’t it be powerful that, because of your response, we can communicate with greater ease and better flexibility so that our mission and ministry are clearly stated?

Yes, that Big Hairy Audacious Goal will take sacrifice, commitment, and the decision that increasing your weekly giving by a minimum of $6 per week is worth it all. For some, that goal is easily reachable. If that is so, don’t make that amount a minimum. For others, it will be a real stretch, but it can happen. For others, it may not be doable, but perhaps a different amount will be the option. But if we don’t try “$6 for 60,” nothing will happen.

This temple that we call our church home cannot continue to be a place of Decades of Dedication and wellness unless we, as God’s people, respond with our gifts. Stewardship is not knocking heads or devising schemes for wringing dollars out of pockets. It is not planting a huge thermometer by the pulpit or making a sideshow of our progress. Stewardship is deciding to trust and making a commitment to show that our trust is real. “Stewardship is everything we do after we say ‘I believe.’”[3]

Remember the story of the two grasshoppers that fell into a bowl of cream? One of them complained and groaned over his plight and sank to the bottom where he drowned. The other kept singing and cheerfully kicked his feet until the cream turned into butter, and then he hopped away to freedom.

We have a choice: We can hope to be cured and then go on our way. Or we can ask God to heal us of our dis-ease and empower us with Christ’s wellness so we can get up, share gratitude, and rejoice in the work of the Lord. It is up to us.

Resources


Reflection Questions

- What kinds of dis-ease have you experienced? Bodily, personal, spiritual, social?
• When have you taken healing love for granted?
• What is your own BHAG in your life?