Sermon on Mark 1: 40 – 45 – Don’t Tell Anyone!

“A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, ‘If you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: See that you don’t tell this to anyone.”

Did you see it? That hilarious commercial! Do you believe it? That spectacular catch! Do you remember it? That blizzard we had about this time last year! Hard to believe we’re having the warmest winter here in over eighty years! Why is it that we often have no problem talking about things like this with people, but often find it so difficult to talk about the greater things in life, like what Jesus has done for us?

The leper in our text for today had no problem telling others about what Jesus had done for him even though Jesus told him not to. He had been cured of leprosy! He had been given a new lease on life! Leprosy was a horrible disease for which there was no cure. It was a disease that resulted in lumps, bumps, sores, and deformities of the skin. It affected the nerves beneath, bringing about a gradual loss of sensation to touch and temperature. It was a disease that slowly ate away at the skin of its victims, bringing about a slow and painful death. It was also seen as highly contagious which meant lepers were banished to a life of loneliness and separation. Isolated from family and friends, it was a living death sentence. Imagine being admitted to a hospital with a disease that would find you quarantined for the rest of your life, never being able to hug or hold your loved ones again. Lepers lived in colonies where misery loved company. In fact, Jews of Jesus’ day were more likely to throw rocks at lepers to keep them away rather than get anywhere near them.

But not Jesus. When a leper came to him and begged him, “If you are willing, you can make me clean,” Jesus could have said, “keep your distance, I can heal you from right here,” but he didn’t. No, Mark tells us he was filled with compassion and reached out his hand and touched him. “I am willing…Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.” You would have thought that Jesus would have told him to go out and tell everyone the good news, but he didn’t.

Mark tells us, “Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: “See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” God’s ceremonial law demanded that God’s people be ceremonially clean. When they weren’t, God’s ceremonial law also established steps for God’s people to get clean. The leper had other ideas. Mark tells us, “Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places.”

Would you have been able to keep your lips sealed? God wants us to tell everyone about Jesus, so why would Jesus tell someone not to tell others about him? Jesus knew how people think. Increased popularity would also bring about increased opposition from the religious leaders of the day. Don’t forget, Jesus still had a mission to accomplish and nothing could stand in his way because our salvation depended on it. Jesus knew all this. He knew that the leper wouldn’t be able to keep his mouth shut and yet love moved him to reach out his hand to touch and heal the untouchable.

The same love that moves him to reach out his hand to touch and heal us. By nature we have a disease much worse than leprosy. We have a disease known as sin. It’s true that we have a difficult time keeping good news to ourselves, but we also have a difficult time telling others the good news of Jesus. We have a difficult time keeping gossip to ourselves. We have a difficult time putting the best construction on others and taking their words and actions in the kindest possible way. From little on we’ve been told that if we can’t say something nice we shouldn’t say anything at all. Do we, all the time? We might try to justify our words and actions by convincing ourselves that other people started it and we’re just trying to stick up for ourselves and the way we feel things should be. But two wrongs don’t make a right. I recently heard it said that firefighters usually don’t fight fire with fire, they normally use water to put the fire out. You see far worse than the burning pain of leprosy is the burning pain of hell that we deserve for our sins.

The leper had to live separated from God’s people. So too sin separates people from God. The prophet Isaiah writes, “your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” Leprosy had no man-made cure. The same could be said about sin. Solomon writes in the book of
Proverbs, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” Living a good life with the hopes of healing ourselves are met with the words of James, “whoever keeps the whole law, and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” Like leprosy, sin is living-death, as the Apostle Paul writes, “the wages of sin is death.” When it comes to the leprosy of sin, all we can do is follow the example of David who asked God to, “wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.” Complete healing and cleansing can only be found in Jesus. Like the leper in our text, may it lead us to fall to our knees in repentance begging, “Lord, if you are willing you can make me clean.” And he not only can, but he does. For the times we haven’t shared the good news about Jesus with others, Jesus shared the good news with all people. For the times we’ve reached out to gossip to and about others, Jesus was kind and compassionate and spoke well of others at all times and in all places. He lived the perfect life we couldn’t and haven’t. When it came to the leprosy of our sin, he carried our diseases and infirmities and iniquities to the cross. His hands were stretched out on that cross and he showed us the full extent of his love. As he himself tells us, “greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” The punishment that should have been ours, became his. The eternal pain that should have been ours, became his. The eternal life in heaven that shouldn’t have been ours, became ours by the grace of God. As blood and water flowed from his side, our sins were washed away. As Paul writes, “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” rather we look forward to an eternity of joy and happiness together with Jesus and all believers in heaven.

“Don’t tell anyone?” I. We have no such command. II. We have the command to go and tell! Jesus told the leper not to tell anyone because he hadn’t accomplished every aspect of his mission. That’s no longer the case. With his mission accomplished, we have the command to go and tell! The better the news, the harder it is to keep quiet. The leper had been healed of leprosy and he couldn’t keep quiet about it! We’ve been healed of something much worse, so why do we keep quiet about it? Maybe it’s because we’re afraid that if we start telling people about Jesus, we’re going to be seen as the lepers. We’re going to be avoided at all costs. We’re going to feel isolated among family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. We’re going to be seen as the unteouchables. We’re going to have to deal with the rolled eyes, the laughter, the whispers of “be quiet, here he or she comes.” Jesus tells us, “He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me.” Jesus also tells us, “whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown before my Father in heaven.”

We’re not the lepers. We’re the clean because Jesus has cleansed us through his death and resurrection. The lepers are those who don’t know and believe in Jesus. But don’t look at them as the unteouchables. God wants all people to have the health and healing only Jesus can provide. If only unbelief exhibited itself as an external skin condition. Then we could see who has it and who doesn’t. Then it would be so much easier to go up to people and say, “I see what you’re suffering from. Guess what? I have the cure! Look at what Jesus has done for me!” Then maybe unbelievers would come to us begging for the cure and we could tell them what Paul and Silas told the jailer at Philippi, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

If only it were that easy! In a way it is. You do have a glow about you, but it’s not the lotions or moisturizers you use. Jesus says, “You are the light of the world…let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Unbelief doesn’t show itself in external skin conditions but it can be seen in hurting hearts, hopeless lives, people living as though this life is all that there is, people not knowing what lies beyond the grave. But you do. You have the answer. You have the cure. If you had the cure for cancer, wouldn’t you share it with others? You have a cure for something much worse. You have the cure for sin and its eternal consequences. Don’t keep it to yourself! Don’t tell anyone? The leper in our text was told not to tell anyone and he couldn’t keep quiet! We have no such command. May we never keep quiet about what Jesus has done for us! May the Holy Spirit strengthen and motivate us to, “go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” What great things Jesus has done for us! Do you see it? Can you believe it? What are you going to do with it?

Amen.