

I Do Choose
Mark 1:40-45
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We all know that the person who receives the highest marks in a school's graduating class is called the valedictorian. Well, do you know what they call the person who receives the *lowest* marks in a class graduating from medical school? Doctor. The very last American football player chosen each year in the amateur draft is dubbed Mr. Irrelevant, but at least his name appears on some team's roster. That's right, in the medical profession, in American football, and in the Kingdom of God, it doesn't matter in what order, or by what method, you were chosen, but rather *that* you are chosen in the first place. And you *are* chosen.

Tonight's story from Mark contains one of the most amazing statements of Jesus in all of the Gospels. Even with all the important red letters Jesus gets in our Bibles, the words, "I do choose," are perhaps the three most significant, as full of power as "It is finished," as life changing as "Sin no more," as soul piercing as "Father forgive them." "I do choose. Be made clean," he says to the man with leprosy. "And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean." Here was a man who had been quarantined outside of town, left to fend for himself when he was least able to care for himself, whom people feared and even loathed, the object of scorn and the belief that he had earned his condition by some sin he must have committed, a man whom we could say misfortune had chosen, and yet Jesus

chooses him, chooses to listen to him, chooses to respond to him, chooses to touch him. Yes, his disease was bad enough, his skin showing evidence of the disease, but it was the social cost which was even more expensive. At the purely human level, is there really anything more debilitating than knowing you have been rejected for something beyond your control? You see, despite the stories in the Bible in which God levels a punishment of leprosy, and the common belief that lepers had sinned to earn their disease, it was the lepers themselves who really knew, deep down, like Job knew, deep down, that they had done nothing wrong and had simply come down with a disease like any other, and then suddenly found themselves on the wrong end of a community's fear and judgment.

It's a bit of a stretch to modern times, but perhaps the leper in our story could have related to this letter written to advice columnist Abigail Van Buren, and maybe you can too: "Dear Abby: I am 10 years old and in 5th grade. All my life I have been chosen last. That's my problem. Physical Education (P.E.) is my least favorite class in school, not because I don't like sports -- I enjoy them. But it is so humiliating always being chosen last. I dread going to school on days when I know we will have P.E. Why can't physical education teachers use a different system? P.E. teachers must have never had to experience what I have each day in P.E. I will go into the class again tomorrow to be chosen last. Why don't they just hang a sign on me that says, "Reject. Last one to pick gets me." I'm sure there are other kids who feel the same way. There is one in every P.E. class. It really hurts. My mom

says not to let it bother me. Please don't say, 'Practice the sport and you'll be great at it and everyone will want you on their team.' It doesn't work that way. I'm kind of quiet, and even if you're not bad at the sport, once you've been chosen last you will be last next week, the week after, and next year too. What can I do? Always Chosen Last, Scottsdale, Arizona.”

As she always does, Abby responds wisely by saying: “Dear Always Chosen Last: Perhaps there is nothing you can do, but there is plenty your P.E. teacher could do if he or she had the sensitivity and imagination. If I had my way, I would outlaw that system of choosing up sides. It's cruel! It was used many years ago when I was a girl in Sioux City, Iowa. It was wrong then, and it's still wrong!” At the purely human level, is there really anything more debilitating than knowing you have been rejected for something beyond your control? Just ask those in the numerical or political minority in any culture who stand out for being short or tall, or fat or skinny, or black or brown or white, or with a limp or a visible birthmark, or with a different sexual orientation or religious conviction who are treated differently for something about which they can do nothing, even if they wanted to. If Dear Abby sounds angry in addition to comforting, she is not alone. How many more teen suicides will it take for us to get what Jesus is showing us in this passage?

The original Greek text of this passage has an ambiguity that has puzzled interpreters through the years. In verse 41, at least in the version I read, it says,

“Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.” To say that Jesus was “moved with pity” suggests a very appealing sort of compassion in Jesus that is quite comforting in our moments of personal distress. But the ambiguity about this passages resides in the fact that the Greek word used here simply means he showed great emotion, and in fact, that same word is frequently used to describe the emotion of anger, and maybe some of your Bibles even have that footnote, as mine does, that tells us that what that verse could be saying is that Jesus, moved by anger, rather than pity, stretched out his hand and touched the man. And so we are led to ask ourselves why Jesus would be angry, and whether he was angry at the leper, or at something else. Well, it seems to me that in light of some more current research that suggests that the kind of leprosy we find in the Bible is not the kind of skin-falling-off, incurable, highly contagious modern variety of leprosy we could read about in National Geographic magazine, but rather a temporary, non-communicable, and actually curable kind of malady for which in Scripture there is even provided a ritual for what you were supposed to do when you were cured of it, that Jesus may have been angry more at the way this man was treated by those who should have been caring for him, than that the man had contracted leprosy in the first place.

Maybe some of you have seen the movie Ben Hur, set in the time of Jesus, in which the main character makes his way to the leper colony where his mother, whom he thought was dead, has been placed. And Ben Hur enters into what is

depicted in the film as this shadowy place of death where the sick live in caves and the healthy fear to tread, and retrieves his mother who is horrified not only that her son would see her in her physically deformed condition due to the leprosy, but also that he might contract it. Well, Ben Hur may make for some good cinema, but not so much as Biblical background. It is true that lepers were segregated outside the camp, or outside the town, but it was more for reasons of religious purity than for community health. Lepers were considered to be more morally impure than physically impure, and if there was contamination to be shared, it was of a moral kind, with the physical skin spots and blemishes simply as evidence of transgression against God. There is a reason why in the Bible there are no descriptions of skin falling off and protruding sores and all that we usually associate with leprosy. And that reason is that it probably wasn't part of the leper's experience in those days and that in the end, it wasn't much different than a woman menstruating, or someone who even accidentally touched the bed of someone who died; they were "unclean" and there was a corresponding action to take. It was just that in the case of these skin diseases we now lump together and call leprosy, the evidence stuck around longer, and so there was reason to continue to ostracize. Like the little boy who wrote to Dear Abby: "I'm kind of quiet, and even if you're not bad at the sport, once you've been chosen last you will be last next week, the week after, and next year too. What can I do?" Very likely, Jesus

was both “moved with pity,” and very angry when this man seeks him out after next week became next year.

All of this is not to take anything away from the miracle Jesus performed in cleansing the man of his leprosy, but it is to draw attention to the greater miracle, that he chose someone others had rejected for all the wrong reasons. If there is a modern parallel that might serve us better than ten year old angst about being chosen last in sports, it is, of course, the way people with AIDS were treated when that disease arrived on the scene in the 1980s. Armed with the same sort of misinformation about the link between morality and disease, but with just enough evidence to be able to make a case, AIDS patients were largely treated similarly to lepers in Biblical times, both in terms of the fear of the spread of the disease, but also the supposed moral failure that was presumed to be responsible for it. Even today, when the heterosexual and medically-produced spread of HIV/AIDS has proven otherwise, there are many who still believe, and will freely post on internet message boards, that AIDS is an African disease begun by and spread by homosexuals who had sex with monkeys, and that it is God’s curse on homosexuals. I’m not Jesus, to be sure, but I suspect that Jesus would be as angry about today’s racist and homophobic attitudes as he was when that leper came to him, begging him, and kneeling, said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” You see, what that means is that if you choose, Jesus, you can make my skin clean, but you can also make it so people don’t fear me, hate me, shun me, spit

on me, hurl insults at me, just when I need people the most, and all for no good reason. You see, I'm human, and I need pity and compassion and love.

Jesus will experience all of those things soon enough in our story. He will be feared, hated, shunned, spit upon, and insulted, not to mention killed, and all for no good reason. And all for something over which he had no control. You see, once we know, like Jesus himself knew, once we know, like the leper in our story knew, once we know that we are chosen, that we are loved unconditionally no matter what others may say, that we have purpose even when others say we are worthless, that we have life abundant even when others would deprive us of even our dignity, when we know we are chosen, we become something, someone, some way over which we then truly no longer have any control. What did the man do after he was chosen by Jesus? *Even after* Jesus told him not to tell anyone, he can't help but tell! And when that happens, we can be assured that we will stand out, that we will attract some attention, that we too will be feared, hated, shunned, spit upon, and insulted, and all for no good reason, but also fully able to choose others in the name of Jesus Christ, as we have been chosen. May God help us as we share this good news, that Jesus says, "I do choose." Amen.