

THE POLITICS OF HOLINESS¹
Mark 1: 40-45
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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The big issue this week has been how to get out of a mess. A-Rod and Michael Phelps used the time-tested excuse of saying that they were young and stupid. One of the bank presidents hauled before a congressional committee this week promised to cut his own salary to \$1 a year until his bank returned to profitability, and he apologized for even thinking of buying a \$50 million jet after getting government money. Congress dealt with a mess by practicing the legislative art of compromise and came up with a bill for the President to sign this week. Ruth Madoff dealt with a mess by withdrawing \$15 million before her husband was arrested, and Stewart Parnell, head of Peanut Corporation of America, decided to take the fifth.

There are clearly many approaches to getting out of a mess, and just as clearly there are those who, like the Pharisees in the New Testament, have concluded that only a return to what they deem as holiness will enable us to get out of whatever mess we are in. In their eyes, the banking industry, the government scandals, unemployment, health care challenges,

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poverty, war, the whole list of challenges we face, can only be solved by a return to what they deem as holiness.

I

So let us think for a few minutes about the politics of holiness. The model is in the first century biblical writings. There were those who looked at all the problems facing their society and who concluded that only a strict constructionist interpretation of the Torah would enable them to get out of their mess. They declared that observing all the purity laws which had developed over the centuries would enable them to solve not only their religious woes, but also their economic woes, their political woes, their business woes. They were Taliban-like Fundamentalists of their day.

Does that sound at all familiar? There are plenty of well-meaning people today whose view of all our national challenges is so simplistic that they practice what we could call the politics of holiness. As important as our religion is— as all-pervasive as our faith is— I believe that the mess we are in is far more complex than the politics of holiness will address. Besides, the politics of holiness often degenerates into bigotry, demonizing its enemies and creating scapegoats to preserve its illusion of purity. The politics of holiness too often lead to inquisitions and crusades and holocausts and witch hunts and Klan rallies and hate crimes and murder for

righteousness's sake. The politics of holiness too often prove what Pascal observed: "[People] never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

II

So how do we counter the politics of holiness and other reactionary movements with a healthy and productive religious faith, and at the same time recognize the deep complexities of the mess we are in and perhaps contribute to its solution? Can it be that we have before us two ancient stories about healing from leprosy that could serve us well in our current dilemmas? Consider these stories that can serve as models for a better approach than the politics of holiness.

Here we have two healing stories, both about leprosy, and no doubt people of every political persuasion today would agree that we could use a healing miracle in our land. The first is quite astounding because it has to do with the healing of an enemy. Naaman was not only Israel's enemy, he was the commander of the enemy's army!

The politics of holiness would label Naaman as evil, worthy only of contempt. But here is a story that cuts through the politics of holiness and introduces the politics of compassion. The prophet Elisha saw beneath Naaman's uniform and medals and his designation as the enemy and

discovered there a human being who was sick with leprosy. And while Israel's king saw in Naaman only an enemy, Elisha reached out with a ministry of human compassion.

*Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean.*² So said Elisha to this enemy commander.

Naaman, in all his grandeur, was offended. He protested that his religion has its own sacred rivers— why bother with Israel's sacred river? But a servant comes to him and says in effect, "Just do what the funny little man says— what harm can it do?" And so, as miracle stories tend to go, Naaman dips himself seven times in Israel's sacred river, and he comes up with skin like that of a young boy, and he is completely healed.

The other miracle story takes place centuries later, and this one has to do with Jesus. Early in the gospel of Mark, Jesus encounters a leper, who kneels before him and says, *If you choose, you can make me clean.* If you choose, you can look beyond these horrible, puss-filled sores on my body and see a real live human being. If you choose, you can move beyond the politics of holiness, the politics that views me as sinful because of my illness, my poverty, my skin color, my odor, my ancestry, my clothing, my accent, my life-style— you can move beyond all that and see beneath all

² II Kings 5: 10.

my labels a real human being with a heart that beats just like yours. If you want, you can make me clean!

The story then goes on to tell us that Jesus *stretched out his hand and touched him, and...immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.*³ There was no dipping in a sacred river this time. It was just the touch, but then Jesus instructsō no, it is stronger than that, he sternly warned the man not to publicize his healing (as if people wouldn't notice!), but to go to the local priest for a ritual cleansing. He told the man to go through the religious ritual, to accommodate tradition, and have the priest pronounce him cleansed from his leprosy. Why? The text says it: *...as a testimony to them!*⁴ Accommodate the custom in order to give testimony to something larger and more important than clerical ritual: namely, the power of God to declare as human and good someone who had been declared by the religious and non-religious people alike as worthless and deserving of ostracism.

Jesus was practicing the politics of compassion. The politics of holiness tend to separate and judge; the politics of compassion tend to bring people together and heal. We see it being practiced in both of these healing stories.

³ Mark 1: 41-42.

⁴ Mark 1: 44.

III

Anyone who thinks that compassion is a weak virtue has not paid attention to the rest of the gospel story or the rest of the human story. People of real compassion are rarely treated well by society. Yet we are called by Jesus himself to a life of compassion. It is sometimes dangerous, often unpopular, and frequently exhilarating to practice the politics of compassion.

We opened our worship service today with a hymn that recognizes the Jordan River as a metaphor. In the Bible, it is a sacred river for the Jews. It was there that Naaman dipped himself seven times and was healed. It was there that Jesus was baptized. But the Jordan River is also more than a physical river. It is a symbol, and we hear it in many of our songs and in our speaking. We remember the Jordan in our baptism. *On Jordan's stormy banks...[we] stand and cast a wishful eye.* An old spiritual sings of hearing old Jordan roll. Those who first sang that spiritual spoke of the Jordan, but they were thinking of the Ohio River, the Mason-Dixon Line, and dreaming of freedom. And, of course, we sing of the Jordan as a metaphor of death- crossing over the river into a promised land, *with its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God.*

My friend Greg Mobley, who teaches Hebrew Bible at Andover Newton Theological School, has reminded me that the Jordan River is fed by the melting snows on Mt. Hermon in Syria, the northern boundary of the Golan Heights. Mt. Hermon itself is a sacred place in the Middle East; it always has been. Mt. Hermon, through the ages, has been the site of over 20 temples of various faiths. Baal; Zeus; Helios, the sun god; Pan, the woodlands god, have all been worshipped on Mt. Hermon.

Isn't it interesting that when we sing of the Jordan as our sacred river, we are immersed in our symbols and traditions— stories about Elisha and John the Baptist and Jesus— that somewhere melted in there is the water from traditions common to other faiths, some hopes and fears of other people who have worshipped in other ways and called their god by other names.

Like Naaman we come to immerse ourselves in our traditions, our stories, hoping for a cleansing. Like the leper in the gospel of Mark, we hope in meeting Jesus that we and all our land can be cleansed and renewed. And these stories do mean a great deal to us. But remember, that when we are immersed in our stories, our traditions, we are only immersed in our little stretch of the sacred river.

If we were looking at the river from a higher perspective, we could see the entire Jordan Valley from Mt. Hermon's melting snow to its end in the Dead Sea, and appreciate the commonalities among all the faiths that have worshipped there. Even higher, from the perspective of an astronaut, we could see the entire Great Rift Valley, from Turkey to Malawi, and know that many faiths contribute to that river, and that practicing compassion is far more important than practicing purity, for purity is at best a dream and at worst a nightmare.

IV

If we listen with the ears of Christ, we can hear the call of all those whom society considers outcast and different: *If you choose, you can declare me clean!*