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January 15, 2020

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“Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched the leper” (Mark 1:40-43).

1 Sam 4:1-11; Mark 1:40-43

The ideas of expansion and stretching are prevalent in the Gospels, suggesting a key theme to Jesus’ ministry as a show of God’s flexibility and freedom to go beyond self-imposed or legal limits. When Jesus heals the leper in today’s Gospel, he is stretching both a taboo based on fear of contamination and ritual purity rules about who could be in the community. He is behaving radically when he associates with public sinners and pagans. He pushes the limits of the Sabbath laws by healing the sick to reassert that compassion is more important than sacred protocols and traditions

Mark dramatizes this theme by having Jesus physically stretch out his hand to touch the leper. He is reaching across a boundary imposed by fear and religious discrimination against whole classes of “untouchables” Jesus is confronting a society obsessed with hand washing as a way to keep the unwashed poor away from the wealthy, or to control women by declaring them unclean during their monthly cycles. The Kingdom Jesus preached expanded social equality and declared God accessible to everyone. The Kingdom was ever expanding beyond the borders of Israel, stretching to the ends of the earth.

Jesus’ parables reached to the margins, praising poor widows, penitent publicans in the temple, hated Samaritans, foreigners, tax collectors and wise stewards. Something new was happening, and even the institutions would have to be flexible to hold the new wine, new ideas and attitudes. Closed minds and hardened hearts

would have to change or be left behind.

We know in our health-conscious, live-forever culture that flexibility is the secret of staying active. The same principle applies to our minds and spirits. We stay healthy by exercising our minds and spirits by learning new things and meeting new people. Retreating to our comfort zones or inner circle of like-minded people is the death rattle for a person, a group or society as a whole.

The Word of God calls us to listen to the many-splendored manifestations of grace all around us, to break down barriers of prejudice and fear that constrict and limit our capacity for openness and love. Jesus challenged his hearers and especially his opponents with the promise he had come to give life, abundant life. God's love is like a river, living water seeking dry soil and withered roots. To pray is to welcome more life, and more life will stretch and enlarge us until we can hold the mystery of God. This is the joy of the Gospel.

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