

Epiphany 6 (B) – February 12, 2012
Saint Stephen's Church, Wimberley, TX
Patrick Gahan
Mark 1:40-45

Things will be different...when I touch another!

I was touched. There's no doubt about that. I just didn't expect to be touched from quite so far away.

It all began when I received a curious, beat-up package in the mail. The return address was a series of numbers and codes that made little sense to me. When I opened the parcel, I reached in and pulled out an American flag. [*Preacher holds up the flag.*] I then pulled out a certificate that read: United States Marine Corps: *This certifies that the accompanying American Flag was flown over Forward Operating Base Payne, Helmand Province, Afghanistan on September 24, 2011 in Honor of Fr. W. Patrick Gahan, by the Marines and Sailors of the Forward Deployed Reconnaissance Battalion, USMC.*

I read it, and thank goodness I was alone in my office, because the tears began to flow. Why would one of my former students, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate and soon-to-be captain in the Marine Corps, remember me when he was the one who was thousands of miles from home in one of the most dangerous pieces of real estate in the world. Suddenly, the war, Afghanistan, the fear, the bravery, and the pain of that far off place came very near to me. Once I was composed, I burst out into the outer office and shared the news with Jeannetta and Connie. The gift had touched me so deeply, I could not keep it to myself.

Perhaps my experience, in some small way, can help us see what it means to the leper that Jesus touches him. In that ancient world, a leper might as well have been thousands of miles apart from those he loves. Take a mere glance at the Torah and you will see what I mean: *The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean' (Leviticus 13:45-46).* The Bible prescribes that the leper manifest the customary outward signs of mourning – torn clothes and disheveled hair – because he was just as good as dead to others.

Yet the leper in this story ignores the social constraints expected of him and dares to walk right up to Jesus, fall to his knees, and say, *'If you choose, you can make me clean.'* Jesus then, moved at the sight and words of the man, *stretched out his hand and touched him (Mark 1:40-41).* And with that one touch, the leper, who had been so far away, was brought back – back from the dead.

Jesus then sends the leper off to be screened by the authorities so that he can be reunited with his family and his friends in the village. But Jesus admonishes him (The Greek actually says, "Jesus *snorted* at him.") to keep quiet about what had just occurred. That's one thing the

former leper can't do. Touched so deeply by Jesus, he tells everyone in sight – much like that middle-aged preacher. So Jesus has to now stay clear of the cities because he will be mobbed.

We shouldn't be surprised that each one of us is the leper in the story. Paul understood this when he said, *'But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ'* (**Ephesians 2:13**). Luke, Paul's disciple, understood it, too, in his telling of the Parable of the Prodigal Son: *'When the son, who had abased his father, was yet far off, his father saw him silhouetted against the horizon, and filled with compassion; he ran, put his arms around his son and kissed him'* (**Luke 15:20**). Paul and Luke, both highly regarded in the circles they once kept, knew they were thousands of miles apart from God until Jesus touched their hearts. We're Luke, we're Paul, we're the leper who is stuck on the outside until Jesus touches us with amazing grace we do not for a minute deserve.

We, too, like the leper, must step out of the same old patterns and expectations in order to open ourselves to Christ's touch. The most powerful line in the *Reconciliation of a Penitent*, popularly known as *Confession*, in our Prayer Book is this: *But I have squandered the inheritance of your saints, and have wandered far in a land that is waste* (**BCP, 450**). Jesus just waits for us to come to ourselves – like that Prodigal Son – who has wandered so far from the love of his father and change direction. When we do, Christ runs out to us – and not the other way around. Our part is only to want his touch.

When Christ touches our heart, we can't keep it to ourselves. We'd have to be gagged, drugged, and thrown into a trunk of a Chevrolet to keep silent. We become like Zacchaeus, whose story is, again, told in Luke. The little man is stuck up in a Sycamore tree far away from the people who despise him. But he is not too far off from Jesus. *'Zacchaeus, come down from that tree; for I must stay at your house today'* (**Luke 19:5**). No one wanted to "stay at Zacchaeus' house – the little cheat. Jesus reaches across all that history and graft and ugliness and touches Zacchaeus. At that, the little man can't keep quiet and he shouts to the rafters, *'Look, half my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.'* All that Jesus can say to that is, *'Today, salvation has come to this house'* (**Luke 19:8-9**). Zacchaeus manifests both the words and actions of a new life in Christ.

So often, Jesus touches me through another. Take last Sunday. A bunch of us were at the nursing home. I sat there as we set up for the *Gospel Sing-along*, feeling inadequate and out-of-sorts in a place filled with people whose problems dwarf me. About that time, a BIG man rolled up to me in his wheelchair, banging into my table. "Hello," he said, "my name is Leroy, and I am from Progresso, TX. I dug water wells down in the valley. I had seven rigs going at a time." By the looks of Leroy, if he could only get out of that wheelchair he'd drill seven more this evening! He then peered hard at me. "You a veteran," he asked? "Ye...ess, sir." I responded. "I was in World War II. I even served at the Nuremberg Trials. Saw Goering try to kill himself." Leroy then reached his huge hand across the table and swallowed mine. And his touch – reminding me that Christ can show up on any horizon – restored my *flagging* zeal! [*Preacher holds up flag again.*]