**Gospel:** Mark 1:40-45

A leper\* came to him begging him, and kneeling\* he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ 41Moved with pity,\* Jesus\* stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’ 42Immediately the leprosy\* left him, and he was made clean. 43After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 44saying to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.’ 45But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus\* could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

**Message**: Uninhabited Place

 In Mark’s gospel, Jesus began his ministry in the religious space of the synagogue. Sounds logical, that he being born into the Jewish culture and instructed by Jewish rabbis, attended Sabbath worship faithfully as was his habit, he would begin his preaching about God and announcing that the Kingdom of God is near in places of worship, places that should be open to and aware of God’s presence. He and his message, however, were not confined to the synagogue nor only on the Sabbath, as he taught and healed many in the private space of Simon’s house and very possibly other houses as he went about proclaiming the message in the neighboring towns. (Recall he told the disciples to stay in a house that welcomed them, possibly having set the example.) These were the well-defined spaces that included boundaries—walls, doors, city gates—and regulations. There were regulations about who could enter the synagogue, where the men worshiped, where the women were permitted to watch or the alien among them. In the houses there may have been verbal invitations to neighbors by the hosts that Jesus was staying with them and would be teaching, and hopefully healing, on any given evening. Walls and boundaries keep people in and keep people out.

 As he traveled from town to town, the open space, the in-between space was where the travelers or outcasts were to be found. The hills in Israel are riddled with caves where lepers and so-called possessed found shelter. Jesus is approached by one of the lepers, one condemned to misery and, quite probably, an early death. Food may or may not have been provided by family members, left for them at a designated area for the diseased person to pick up. (The first Grubhub?) Scripture says Jesus was “moved with pity” or “filled with compassion.” One translation mildly reads “felt sorry for him.” The context indicates much more than pity or feeling sorry for the man. Jesus’ reaction was profoundly intense and emotional. His was a visceral response that propelled him to action. He chose to cross social and religious boundaries by touching the unclean man that resulted in this particular healing. Not only that, but Jesus himself at that moment took on the man’s uncleanness, becoming ritually impure—contaminated.

 Jesus reached out his hand, touched the leper thereby offering his personal presence to one who has been excluded from society and any community involvement. Medical studies in the modern era have proven the value and importance of physical touch in healing, particularly in premature babies. Touching and holding the baby plays a vital role in their will to survive and thrive. Those in hospice care in nursing homes are eased of anxiety with simple hand or foot massages. Consider the emotional and physical damage caused by COVID quarantine and isolation. Jesus personal presence, our being personally present to others is powerful for restoration to health and wholeness or promoting inner peace as one transitions to the next life. Jesus offered his hand as a sign of mercy and a sign of community, being able, once again, to live a shared life in reconciliation with fellow humans. At the same time, this profoundly emotional gesture soundly disrupted the social order as he continued to be and to minister among those deemed socially unacceptable.

 The leper was healed and liberated from a life of isolation, poverty and early death. In that same gesture, Jesus sent a message condemning the social, political and religious orders that continued then and continue today to add to the existing misery of those in greatest need. Jesus’ response and presence was a call to break down the barriers that relegate people with various illnesses or disabilities or biases or societal taboos to the hinterlands, places where the rest of society need not see them nor occupy common space nor even discuss their debilitating conditions.

 Jesus, knew Mosaic law. He also knew how the religious hierarchy used the law to oppress people. He told the man to show himself to the priest, offer what was required by law, and quietly return to family and community. This command in itself was an act of holy defiance on Jesus’ part. One religious scholar’s explanation that makes sense is that the man’s petition had already been rejected for some reason. The “leprosy” could have been a non-contagious skin irritation, but the priest was flexing religious muscle because he could. (We see this in our current judicial system where elaborate and convoluted laws touted and adhered to as making society safe, do nothing but promote the politician while continuing punitive measures rather than correctional and rehabilitative. We see this in our health care system where the exorbitant cost of insurance and prescription medicines are prohibitive to the most vulnerable of people. We see this in trying to find appropriate affordable housing for families. Even those paid staff who are working to help families find housing experience these same difficulties. We see this in federal funding mandates for programs in education that do not consider the individual student and consequently don’t work.) Jesus decided to make an issue of this power play. Showing himself to the priest would have demonstrated that cleanliness, purification and spiritual wholeness do not happen by adhering to laws and codes, but by being in touch with Jesus and, therefore, God. The man disobeyed all three of Jesus’ commands and obeyed the truth by personally exposing the ways of oppression in the world and opening a way of hope for those restricted and rejected by society. In his exuberance he spread the word that God’s unfettered grace flowed through this Jesus from Nazareth. This healed man, this person whom Jesus saved, went joyfully and exuberantly throughout his area of Galilee, himself defying and overcoming the religious and social exclusion systems by not doing what Mosaic law required that dominated and still dominate, reducing people to chattel.

 Uninhabited places are not geographic wilderness areas, but places in the heart, places in one’s soul, where walls have been erected and where the love of God through Jesus Christ is excluded. Let’s fill those uninhabited places with the Word of God.

**Prayers of the People/the Lord’s Prayer**: Almighty God, we rejoice with those whom you have restored to physical and spiritual wholeness. May they go into their spaces to share their joy and your presence. For those who suffer, we ask for comfort and healing. When we are fearful and anxious, give us courage; when we are weak grant us your strength; when we are afflicted afford us your patience; when we are lost, shine your light of hope on us; when we are alone, move quickly to our side. Thanks to you, O God, for your Presence through Jesus Christ who continues to teach us to pray, “Our Father . .”

**Prayer of Thanksgiving**: Almighty and loving God, we offer our humble thanks for all your goodness and kindness. We bless you for this life and especially for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world through Jesus Christ. Thank you for the means of grace and for the hope of glory. Let our hearts always be thankful and offer praise with our lips and with our lives. All honor and glory are yours, O God. Amen.

**Benediction**: Grant, O Lord, that what has been said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, go in grace to love and serve the Lord.

**Old Testament Reading**: 2 Kings 5:1-17

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. 2Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. 3She said to her mistress, “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” 4So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. 5And the king of Aram said, “Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.” He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. 6He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, “When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.” 7When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.” 8But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, “Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.”

9So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. 10Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” 11But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! 12Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage. 13But his servants approached and said to him, “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” 14So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

15Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.” 16But he said, “As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing!” He urged him to accept, but he refused. 17Then Naaman said, “If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord.

**New Testament Reading**: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. 25Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. 26So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; 27but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.