

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
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Mark 1:40-45

“Splanchnizomai”

*Come Holy Spirit! Come and bless us all.
Fill the hearts of your faithful,
and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.*

If you travel to Israel, which I did in 2000, you find unusual treasures like this little pottery urn for sale in marketplaces. This little urn is a tiny replica of the stone jars that held the Dead Sea Scrolls found by a shepherd in 1947 in the desert near the Dead Sea. Discovering the Dead Sea Scrolls was an extraordinary archaeological find of enormous theological and historical importance to scholars of Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

The Dead Sea Scrolls were written by the “People of the Scrolls” known as the Essenes. The Essenes withdrew from Jerusalem and the other major cities in ancient Israel and formed communities of their own, among which Qumran seems to have been their capital.

Entering into the sect of the Essenes required several years’ probation. Once admitted, the new member was made to swear highly secretive oaths to the community. Their writings reveal that they shared all their worldly possessions, renounced pleasures of the flesh, practiced humility, lived with brotherly love, and followed the teachings of Moses.

The Essene community was remarkable and there is much to say about their lifestyle, faith, and strict philosophy. But what I want to lift up today is the writing in the Dead Sea Scrolls that pertains to the “conditions of admission to the assembly.”

Those permitted access to the “assembly of God” were men who were not contaminated by “impurities.” Listen to these words from the Dead Sea Scrolls: “None of those contaminated by any of the impurities that can touch man may have access to the assembly of God. Whoever is contaminated by impurities, rendering him unable to occupy a post within the congregation,

as well as he who is contaminated in his flesh, scarred in the feet or the hands, limping, blind, deaf, dumb or contaminated by a physical defect in his sight, or also, an aged man too weak to stand straight among the elders; let none of these present themselves for the assembly, for the Holy Angels are present in the congregation.”

I am guessing that all of us would be unacceptable to the Essenes. We are either female (we're all out), or we have blemishes or scars on our feet or hands, or we limp, or we cannot see or hear well, or we are old and stooped....most if not all of us would not be allowed into the assembly of God.

Now think about the culture, the faith, and the world that Jesus knew during his lifetime. Think about the number of people considered unclean—all the untouchables. The Essenes may have been extreme, but Jesus, a good Jew, was raised hearing all the strict purity laws that dominated Jewish faith at the time. Jesus was surrounded by people who were to be avoided, ignored, not touched, not included, chased to the edge of the village—most women, certainly menstruating women, people with fevers and other illnesses, people with any skin disease at all which of course included lepers, people with mental illness who were thought to be possessed by demons, and the list goes on. Even acknowledging those people was frowned upon, touching them made you unclean requiring a ritual cleansing.

Now listen again to today's reading from the Gospel of Mark,

40 A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.' 41 Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' 42 Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 44 saying 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.' 45 But 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.

This passage can be read as another miraculous healing story, and there is value in that interpretation. It can also be read as another moving example of Jesus' loving ministry—how he does not hesitate to touch an untouchable and defy purity laws for the sake of inclusion. And there is value in that interpretation. But this passage takes on an entirely new meaning when you discover what one word in the text really means in the original Greek.

Mark 1:41 is often translated, “Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand...” (we heard that today, from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible)...but that is not the only translation.

Those words are also translated as “Filled with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand...” (New International Version of the Bible).

And probably the worst translation: “Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand...” (New Jerusalem Bible).

The actual word, being translated here in three different ways, is the Greek verb *splanchnizomai*. Many scholars translate the word *splanchnizomai* NOT as pity or as compassion but as anger. The passage in a number of manuscripts reads, “Moved with anger, Jesus stretched out his hand...”

The Greek verb *splanchnizomai* actually refers to be moved in what the Greeks thought was the seat of one’s emotions: one’s intestines, or, as we might say, one’s guts (it has the same root as the word for spleen).

Splanchnizomai is meant to identify and convey a profoundly emotional response. According to Rev. Gary Charles in his commentary on this passage from Mark, Jesus was not just “filled with anger,” he was “snorting with indignation.” That’s right! According to Rev. Charles, Jesus was snorting with indignation.

When *splanchnizomai* is translated not as pity or compassion but as intense anger, we must stop and ask who or what is Jesus so angry at? Is Jesus angry with the man? With being interrupted once again? Why is Jesus so angry he is snorting with indignation?

There are many theories about why Jesus is so angry. I agree with the scholars who say that Jesus is angry at the common and unjust practice of separating people from society because of physical ailments or diseases. Many scholars believe that Jesus is angry that the purity laws of his faith—clear, rigid and imposed—require that some people be labeled clean and others unclean. Jesus is angry that it is accepted practice to leave some people outside the circle of community, connection and healing.

Jesus is “snorting with indignation” at the injustice he witnessed—injustice imposed and practiced by his faith. And that is why we hear this after Jesus heals the leper... *42Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43After sternly warning him Jesus 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.*

Jesus is angry at the unjust practice of exclusion that he so often witnessed and that he was supposed to condone and participate in. Jesus is supposed to turn away the very man in front of him asking for help. Jesus is angry at the priests who refuse to touch and heal lepers. Telling the man once he is healed: Go show yourself to the priest is like a taunt...go show the priests that I touched you and you were made well and whole...go show those cowards who follow the letter of the law and leave people suffering and alone.

Theologian Ched Myers writes about *splanchnizomai* in his book Binding the Strong Man. Myers explains the source of Jesus' rage this way:

"Jesus' instructions that the leper go back to the priests and undergo ritual cleansing only make sense if the man had already been to the priests, who...had rejected his petition. Deciding to make an issue out of it, Jesus sternly gives the leper these orders: See that you say nothing to anyone! Rather go back and show yourself to the priest and make the offering prescribed by Moses for your cleansing as a witness against them (1:44). The cleansed leper's task is not to publicize a miracle but to help confront an ideological system...The leper is to make the offering for the purpose of "witnessing against them" (which in the original Greek is *eis marturion autois*). This is a technical phrase in the Gospel meaning testimony before hostile audiences."

Rev. Gary Charles hammers home the very same point. He writes, "Jesus sends the cleansed leper "back" to the priests not as any nice, obedient Jewish boy would do, but as a sign of holy defiance. He sends the healed man back to demonstrate that cleanliness now happens not by adhering to any codes or laws, but by being in touch with Jesus, who is now ritually unclean but who has the authority to make even a leper clean."

For me what is important in this interpretation, this translation of the Greek verb *splanchnizomai*, is to fully grasp that Jesus was snorting with anger and indignation over injustice. Jesus' ministry was about love and inclusion, peace and justice. And so he is angry, really angry, when people are considered untouchable, unworthy, un-helpable. Jesus is angry, really angry, when ritual practices, codes and laws supersede ending suffering, including all, touching, healing and loving.

Jesus is angry at injustice and this passage should not be translated in ways that water it down to make it more palatable. Jesus should not be domesticated, made tamer, more acceptable to polite company. Saying that Jesus was moved with pity or moved with compassion is inaccurate and makes Jesus far more docile than he was.

Jesus was passionate, his emotions were strong, his words were riveting, his anger was hot. Let's allow Jesus to be authentically Jesus—dramatic, intense and fiery. Let's hear the real words and learn the real lessons.

Jesus was snorting with indignation when he confronted injustice.

May we be like him—unafraid of loving justice as deeply, and responding to injustice as fully.

May we not love Western politeness so much that we shy away from righteous anger in the face of injustice. May we be Jesus' true disciples—fierce and furious when it is time to speak truth to power.

And may we understand the important difference between righteous anger and entitled anger. As Christians we must keep that distinction clearly and firmly in our minds. Entitled anger was evident last Sunday when campuses all over Massachusetts erupted when the Patriots lost the Super Bowl. Students who had their hopes pinned on a Super Bowl victory and felt entitled to a Super Bowl victory were furious when the home team lost. With their strong feelings of entitled anger they rioted, destroyed property, and taunted police. That is not righteous anger.

Righteous anger is anger at injustice...it is clear, it burns pure, and it motivates us to confront the injustice. Righteous anger is Jesus sending the cleansed leper BACK to the priests...here look, I loved him, touched and healed him, while you loved your codes and laws more.

Righteous anger is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King writing to his white clergy colleagues from the Birmingham jail,

“For years now I have heard the words “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” ... We must come to see...that justice too long delayed is justice denied. We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights.”

That's righteous anger.

Righteous anger is part of our faith tradition. Jesus felt and expressed it, the prophets before him like Jeremiah and Isaiah, felt and expressed it, and the prophets who followed him like Rev. King, felt and expressed it.

And we are the heirs of this legacy.

It is in our tradition to love justice enough to express anger at injustice. It is part of our Christian heritage to love justice enough to express anger at injustice. It is part of who Jesus was...he loved justice enough to express anger at injustice.

Splanchnizomai—intense feelings that arise in the gut and propel one to act.

Splanchnizomai—anger so real and consuming that one is snorting with indignation.

Splanchnizomai—Jesus' response to a leper being excluded, unloved and labeled unclean.

Splanchnizomai—our response to injustice when we experience it in the world around us.

Amen.

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