

Introduction

A. My friends, I'd like you to meet several people who live right here in Indiana, October of 2020. Their names are made up but their situations are real:

1. Joan is an extrovert
 - a) She needs frequent socialization and draws her energy from interacting with others
 - b) Joan's mental health is suffering these days due to the isolation of staying home because of COVID-19
2. Derek is a college student.
 - a) He's in quarantine in a special housing unit away from his dorm mates because he was exposed to someone who tested positive for COVID.
 - b) Derek is going stir crazy in his tiny bubble. His friends and peers are so near, and yet also so far away
3. Walter is in his early 90's
 - a) He gets around OK in an assisted living facility, but his world is limited to the neighbors down the hall, the voices on TV, and the family and friends he can talk to on his outdated flip phone.
 - b) Walter says he's way too old to learn how to use a computer, or a so-called "smart phone" or anything with the word "Zoom" in it!
4. Marlene, a patient for the last week in a hospital COVID unit, feels abandoned by God
 - a) Her diabetes, heart condition and previous cancer treatments made her no match for COVID when she got it from an asymptomatic family member
 - b) Now in her fear and weakened state, Marlene's family is prohibited from visiting her.
5. Tony finds himself spending a lot of time with a group of good Christian people
 - a) But these folks have political and theological beliefs that are very different from his
 - b) Tony is a conservative-minded person in a strongly progressive church
6. Leanne also spends a lot of time with some good Xian people
 - a) These persons have political and theological beliefs that are almost opposite of hers
 - b) Leanne works in a business environment where, despite the mask requirement that's posted on the front door, she is the only employee who wears a mask

B. What do these 6 people have in common?

1. You might say they are all 21st Century American equivalents of people who were called “lepers” in New Testament times
2. All 6 of these people could live very near you ... And all 6 of them feel like they could identify with the man in this Bible story who had leprosy
3. Only 2 of them are sick or living with significant limitations, but they all feel marginal, like an outsider, or even a victim

II. (Entering this series & text)

A. As Jane mentioned, today we begin a 7-Sunday series that highlights the surprising ways that Jesus of Nazareth did NOT abide by the expected behavior of his day

1. We will examine what it means for us to be followers of a Savior who subverts the normal way things are done
2. We will ask if we can really aspire to be disciples of a Master who keeps throwing people off guard, offending those in authority, and tossing a monkey wrench into the established social order ...
3. *Hmm*: Subverting what’s normal ... throwing people off guard ... offending the authorities ... and upsetting the social order:

- a) I do believe that in 2020, these 4 actions are also happening in our world: How?

COVID-19 has already subverted our normal way of doing things

We ourselves keep getting thrown off guard

These days people in authority are constantly taking offense and offending others AND

New monkey wrenches continue being tossed into our established social order

- b) What an appropriate time to be asking such questions about following Jesus!

B. Today the subversive action of Jesus that we’re looking at is “embracing” or “welcoming”

1. Now some of you may be wondering what is so subversive about welcoming? Doesn’t everyone appreciate a good welcome?

- a) This is where it’s good to step back from the Christian homes and Christian teachings that many of us have heard all our lives

In understanding today the impact of a 2K-year-old story of Jesus healing a man with leprosy we need to be reminded of our privilege.

We live where opportunities abound for most of us who are listening now, although certainly not for everyone in this country

b) When you combine our global privilege with a global pandemic, this may be one of the most awkward moments ever in our lifetimes for trying to hear and apply Jesus' subversive act of welcoming

The impact of Jesus reaching out and touching someone with leprosy has never felt weirder to us than now, when we have a deadly infectious disease still spreading around us.

How do you hold these 2 things together: on the one hand Jesus touching and healing a person who had a dreaded skin affliction, and on the other, the reminders and mandates all around us to keep 6 feet of social distance?

2. In the last 100 years, we in the United States have never, until now, faced anything so leprosy-like

a) Not to put too fine a point on it this morning, but friends, if you have eyes to see it -- "Leprosy" like in this story is alive and well among us!

b) The action of Jesus to reach out and touch that afflicted man is about as subversive as if Jesus were a nurse offering to work in a hospital COVID unit with no PPE whatsoever! Think about that ...

III. Let's review a little of the background, to see why just welcoming someone made Jesus so subversive

A. Leprosy in NT times was not necessarily what is today called Hansen's disease. It could also have been one of several skin afflictions that made a Jewish person ritually unclean.

1. Biblical leprosy in Jesus' day not only defiled its sufferer, but anyone else could also become unclean just by touching that person with the skin disease.

2. In fact, even touching an object that that person touched also made you unclean!

3. Persons with biblical leprosy were certainly NOT welcomed or embraced – they were outcasts among their own people

a) They were forced to live outside the town and not with family

b) They also had to call out loudly "Unclean! Unclean!" anytime they approached other people

c) In short, people with leprosy were feared & considered untouchables.

B. So why is our Savior's action here controversial? Why was it considered subversive?

1. It wasn't because touching and welcoming someone itself was against the rules, nor even because healing was wrong to do.

2. What Jesus did was subversive because he did not follow the commonly accepted rules and expectations.

3. Let's re-enter the story a little so we can name some spoken and unspoken expectations that Jesus broke

a) The first expectation in the story is that Jesus probably shouldn't be there at all at the edge of town, where the man with leprosy found him

Or at least he shouldn't linger there near "unclean" people. He should just keep moving on into the respectable part of the city.

But Jesus DOES linger there, and he DOES notice the unclean people who everyone else is trying to ignore

Jesus puts himself in a dangerous place where "bad things" could happen

b) Now if Jesus was intent on healing people or otherwise channeling God's power through him, the 2nd Jewish expectation is that stretching out his hand would be going far enough

There is good biblical precedent for someone stretching out their hand as a channel for God to perform a miracle:

(a) The most prominent example is from our Dwelling in the Word series just recently in August.

(i) In Exodus 14, do you remember how the parting of the Red Sea happens?

(ii) It is through Moses, stretching out his hand over the mighty waters, that God's salvation is accomplished

(b) Then in Matthew 12:13 there is another healing story of Jesus, when he heals a man with a withered hand. But in that instance, the healing only occurs when the afflicted man stretches out his own hand, in faith

So people expect that if healing might occur through this rabbi, it will be only through an outstretched hand.

But as you know, Jesus doesn't stop with just an outstretched hand.

c) There is a third Jewish expectation in the story that almost goes without saying: Jesus should NEVER (in all caps) touch a man with leprosy

But Jesus goes ahead and does the unthinkable: You can practically hear the gasps and audible protests all around him.

The next predictable outcome is that Jesus is suddenly alone with this healed man.

(a) After all, every other person in that crowd does the intelligent thing:

(b) As we might say it today, they observe instant social distancing! They scam! Why?

d) Because Jesus himself is now considered unclean, (and they don't want to risk contamination by being around him.)

4. So in all these ways Jesus did the opposite of what was expected of him. That made him a rule-breaker. That made him subversive!

IV. (An expanding embrace)

A. This kind of ministry that Jesus did ... this kind of loving acceptance was shocking to the religious leaders of his day

1. Actually "shocking" may be too mild a word to use in our day when not much shocks us anymore

a) What Jesus did with lepers, and tax collectors, and prostitutes? It was outrageous! Mind-blowing! Eye-popping!

b) His actions exploded through the walls of the rigid boxes carefully maintained by the religious leaders regarding who was welcome and who belonged among God's people.

2. The welcome Jesus offered was much more than merely a physical touch with those considered "untouchable"

a) This welcome was an embrace, both literally and metaphorically

b) By metaphorically I mean embrace as the wholehearted accepting or adopting of an idea or philosophy ... like a new believer in Jesus embracing Christianity

B. The embrace of Jesus did not just extend to the sick, the poor and the demon-possessed who he encountered around Galilee

1. The embrace of Jesus was global ... cosmic in his efforts to heal and reconcile back to God everything that had become stunted and isolated, twisted and broken because of human sin

2. The kingdom where Jesus reigns is an expansive vision of all competing and hostile things coming back into harmony under the lordship of Jesus Christ:

a) dominant abuse of men over women and masters over slaves;

b) warring tribes and clans;

c) light-skinned people being valued more than dark-skinned people;

d) God's good creation viewed not as gifts to be stewarded but as commodities to be pillaged

C. W/out a doubt, social distancing has made many of us ache for physical touch ... and long for embraces we've been missing

1. But just because our appropriate touch and embrace often cannot be physical doesn't mean we can't walk in the footsteps of an embracing Savior

2. What might appropriate touch or embracing look like now for those who want to follow the socially subversive way of Jesus?

3. Here are some possible examples of not simply following the common expectations all around us:

a) I see it in 2 of our recently baptized youth, as we heard last Sunday in the baptism service:

When Jordan Ross Richer has the desire to stand up against racial bullying on the soccer field

When Maddie Chupp is OK wearing sweats to her school's Jr/Sr Banquet rather than succumbing to the pressure for a formal dress

b) I see it in the local Christians who do NOT speak Spanish yet still make friendly, kind and respectful gestures to get to know their Hispanic neighbors

c) I see it in the volunteers too numerous to name who give of their precious time and energies helping people on the margins, at nonprofits like The Window, Center for Healing and Hope, La Casa and Bridge

d) I see it in the people who do weird things like not watch TV or use any social media, in order to have better mental focus and limit the clutter of words and images in their life

e) I see it in the dedicated medical staff who serve in settings of high COVID risk not merely from their professional ethics but also from their commitments to follow the same Jesus who touched people with leprosy

V. Conclusion: This morning you will have the opportunity to take whatever you have on hand to be the bread and the cup remembering our Lord's last supper

A. As you do, first **gratefully receive these symbolic gifts from the God who embraces you**, sinful and imperfect as you are

B. Then I invite you to look for ways in this coming week when you can channel that incredible divine love into an "embrace" of someone whom others have rejected or ignored.

C. As we sing along with the song "Christ's is the world", **may the Holy Spirit show you who to embrace**