

Life Choices  
Sermon on Mark 1:40-45 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, February 12, 2005

In the 1998 film, “Sliding Doors,” Gwyneth Paltrow plays Helen Quilley, a young PR executive who is unjustifiably fired from her job. Helen leaves her office and goes down into the subway, hoping to catch a train. She is returning home when an amazing thing happens: time reverses itself for a few seconds and a second version of herself is created. In one reality Helen catches the tube train, meets James, and arrives home to find her loathsome lothario lover, Gerry, cheating on her with his ex-girlfriend, Lydia. In the other reality, Helen misses the tube train, gets mugged, goes to the hospital and eventually arrives home to find Gerry alone in the shower. The two realities move forward in tandem: In one, Helen leaves Gerry and forms a happy, new, loving relationship with James; in the other, Helen’s life becomes more and more wretched as she takes on two jobs to support her worthless, cheating boyfriend who claims to be writing a novel but is in fact carrying on a torrid affair with Lydia.<sup>1</sup> For Helen, the difference between happiness and misery is the difference made by the sliding doors of a subway train.

The passage we hear today has some sliding doors of its own. Over the past few weeks we have heard how Jesus cast out demons, cured Simon’s mother-in-law, and healed many who were sick in Capernaum. All of these stories of his miraculous cures and exorcisms demonstrate Jesus’ God-given power over sickness and the forces of evil. Now Mark presents us with another healing story, albeit one in which “Jesus’ healing powers go beyond anything that has been related thus far.”<sup>2</sup> A leper came to Jesus, pleading with him to cleanse him of his disease. Moved by the man’s plight, Jesus touched the man and pronounced a cure. Immediately the skin disease left the man, and Jesus ordered him to present himself to the priest to be declared clean.

---

<sup>1</sup> From a plot summary by an anonymous reviewer at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120148/plotsummary>.

<sup>2</sup> Morna D. Hooker, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: A & C Black, 1991) 78.

The first set of sliding doors involves the leper who came to Jesus. There is something quite remarkable about this. We should note that the word ‘leprosy’ in both the Old and New Testaments actually refers to any number of skin diseases, including what we understand as leprosy, or Hansen’s disease. Those with skin diseases were forced to live pitiable lives: In addition to physical pain and discomfort, they suffered social alienation. The law of Moses demanded that lepers wear torn clothes and keep their hair disheveled. When they went out in public, they were forced to cover their upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean,” to warn others of their presence. The law imposed other practical difficulties on lepers so as to keep them from coming into contact with the public.<sup>3</sup>

The law regarded people who suffered leprosy as ritually unclean and feared that they might contaminate others with ritual impurity. Lepers were seen as, in effect, corpses, and coming into contact with them produced the same ritual defilement as coming into contact with dead bodies. So serious and so greatly feared was leprosy that the rabbis believed it was as difficult to cleanse a leper as to raise the dead.<sup>4</sup>

And so it was a dead man walking who came to Jesus. In approaching Jesus, the leper was violating the law, breaking the rules, going against convention, but at that point he had nothing to lose and everything to gain. So this man who could come near others only with the cry, “Unclean, unclean,” now comes near to Jesus, falls to his knees, and begs him, “If you choose, you can make me clean” (1:40). Although he comes as a supplicant, the man does not ask Jesus for healing, but instead makes a statement about Jesus’ ability to heal. He comes believing that Jesus has the power “to remove from him the ravages and stigma of this dreadful disease,” confident that Jesus could do “what was believed impossible by human means.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> From William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974) 86.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 85, note 143. <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

There the man knelt before Jesus, asking for the doors to slide open, doors to healing and wholeness, doors to purity and cleanness, doors to restored relationships that had been broken by disease and isolation. “If you choose,” the man said, “you can make me clean.” PHEME PERKINS says this is a nuanced way of teaching disciples how to pray. The man recognizes that in Jesus the power of God to change lives is at work in the world, and he asks for that power to be unleashed in his own life by God’s gracious choice.

“I do choose,” Jesus said. “Be made clean!” And here we have two very different sets of doors. Most versions of this passage say that Jesus was *splanchnistheis*, “moved with pity” or “filled with compassion.” The Greek word is the same one used to describe the actions of the Good Samaritan and the father of the prodigal son. We expect Jesus to react with pity or compassion for one in so wretched a state as the leper.

But there is a different set of doors, doors which, if opened, allow us to see and understand Jesus’ act in a very different light. A few of the Greek manuscripts say Jesus was not *splanchnistheis*, moved with pity or compassion, but *orgistheis*, moved with anger. There are good reasons for reading *orgistheis*: it is the more difficult reading and causes offense, and thus is more likely to be the original.<sup>6</sup> It also makes Jesus’ harsh response in verse 43 understandable. But this does raise a disturbing question: Why is Jesus angry?

Some scholars have theorized that Jesus is angry because this ritually impure man has approached him and risked making him unclean. But it is clear that Jesus himself reached out to touch this man, thereby risking making himself unclean. Others have suggested that Jesus grew angry because the man expresses some doubt about Jesus’ willingness to heal him. Obviously, however, the man comes in the expectation that Jesus can and will cure him. Still others have

---

<sup>6</sup> Among the scholars I consulted, this is the position taken by William Lane, Joel Marcus, and Morna Hooker. Only PHEME PERKINS opts for reading *splanchnistheis*.

supposed that Jesus became angry because the leper has interrupted his preaching tour. Yet Mark presents Jesus' mission as being one of both preaching and healing; they are part and parcel of the work of God's coming kingdom.

Here the doors open onto another possibility altogether. Perhaps Jesus is not angry with the leper at all. Maybe Jesus' anger is directed "against the evil forces which have claimed the man as their victim,"<sup>7</sup> his rage at "the demonic forces responsible for his affliction."<sup>8</sup> Of course Jesus pitied the leper and had compassion for him. But behind that compassion and under it lay a righteous indignation, a holy ire, a divine anger at the forces of darkness and evil that beset the world and cause human suffering. The pain and isolation this man had experienced because of his disease are contrary to God's purposes for humankind: health and wholeness and well-being.

And so, moved with anger at the forces that imprisoned this man in suffering and shame, "Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!'" (1:41). Again, the doors slide open. With outstretched hand, Jesus bursts open doors of disease and death, doors of sickness and suffering, doors of refusal and rejection, doors that had kept this man locked out of life. With his gentle touch, Jesus reaches out to one who had not known human contact and restores him to his community. With a word of command, Jesus makes this man clean, dispelling his leprosy, creating new life and new possibilities for him.

This is a story about life choices and the doors that can open when we make them. Are you cut off from those around you? Are you isolated by suffering or shame? Have disease or unemployment or sorrow or loss kept you at the margins of society? Have your sins made you unclean? Then come and kneel before Jesus. Say with confidence, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." And receive the good news that he says to you, "I do choose. Be made clean!"

---

<sup>7</sup> Hooker, 80.

<sup>8</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 209.