

“I Want To”: Consequence of Testimony
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO
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Mark 1:40-45

And a leper came to him, pleading with him, falling on his knees and saying to him, “If you want to, you can make me clean.” And moved by compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I want to. Be cleansed!” And immediately the leprosy went from him, and he was made clean. And becoming harsh with him, immediately Jesus drove him out and said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone at all, but go show yourself to the priest and make for your cleansing the offering Moses prescribed, as testimony to them.” But going out he began to proclaim freely and to spread the word, so that Jesus was no longer able to enter openly into a city but was outside, in desert places. And people kept coming to him from everywhere.

Mother Marianne Cope was originally Barbara Koob, born in Germany. She “immigrated with her family to the United States, where their name became Cope. In 1862 she entered the Third Order Regular of Franciscans and received her religious name, [Marianne]. Her early years were spent teaching in her order’s schools and later serving as administrator of a hospital. In 1883, now the superior general of her congregation, she received a request from King Kalakaua in Hawaii for help in caring for leprosy patients. Though fifty other congregations had already declined the king’s plea, Mother Marianne responded at once: ‘I am hungry for the work and I wish with all my heart to be one of the chosen Ones, whose privilege it will be, to sacrifice themselves for the salvation of the souls of the poor Islanders.’

“That year she and six sisters sailed for Hawaii and immediately set to work establishing a hospital in Maui. In light of the fear of contagion and the social stigma attached to those suffering from Hansen’s disease, the sisters’ dedication to their patients won wide respect. Eventually Mother Marianne consented to move to the island of Molokai, where the most serious cases were confined. There, one of her first tasks was to care for Fr. Damien de Veuster, the famous ‘Apostle to the Lepers,’ who had succumbed to the disease during his long years of work.

“Sr. Marianne died of natural causes on August 9, 1918. She was canonized [as a saint] in 2012.

“ ‘Let us make best use of the fleeting moments. They will not return.’ ~St. Marianne Cope”¹

¹ Jan 23 devotion

When we think of “testimony,” we most often associate the word with the act of telling someone else about an experience with something in order to convince them about the truth of some aspect, like the testimony of sharing how God has acted in our lives, as we do in our Moment with God time – telling folks about our experiences with God to show that God *is* indeed active, and to praise God for that activity. Or, we could put it in commercial terms – the testimony about a product or organization – that style of commercial that has a person on screen with the line “Not an Actor” underneath her while she shares her good experience with the product.

But there’s another kind of testimony. This testimony is an action that exemplifies one’s own desire, one’s own beliefs, one’s own commitments. This testimony isn’t just about what God is doing or has done, in one’s life, nor about the quality of a product or organization; it is about acting out *your response to God’s call*.

Sister Marianne’s testimony was in her immediate affirmative response to King Kalakaua’s request for help. “I am hungry for the work,” she said, “and I wish with all my heart to be one of the chosen Ones, whose privilege it will be, to sacrifice themselves for the salvation of the souls of the poor Islanders.’ She had dedicated her life to God, and her testimony of her desire to respond to God’s call, the testimony that she had given again and again in her service thus far, was given yet again in that response – “I am hungry for the work.”

In today’s scripture text, Jesus heals a man with leprosy. This man comes to Jesus, *pleads* with him, and says “If you want to, you can make me clean.” If you want to, you can make me clean.

So often in the healing stories it is *Jesus* who demands the desire from the person being healed. We find it again and again in Mark: “Your faith has healed you.” Do they want it enough, he seems to demand. In this story, we have the *only* instance in Mark where it is Jesus who must give testimony to his own desire to heal. “If you want to, you can make me clean.”

Jesus has already said “I want to” to God’s call in his life – he already made that choice when he came to be baptized, when he went away into the wilderness, when he came out proclaiming God’s message, and when he started healing. These were all instances of providing testimony to his desire to follow God. Now, this “leper” is again offering him yet another opportunity to accept God’s presence and action in Jesus’ life.

It is not a simple choice. There are consequences for Jesus, just as there have been consequences in his other actions of testimony. You see, the leper’s request is not just for healing – it is to be made *clean*. His disease is one that separates him from his community because it makes him religiously “unclean.” He cannot have physical contact with anyone,

partly because of the fear of contagion, and because physical contact with him would make the other person religiously “unclean,” as well. Charles Campbell writes: “He is ‘untouchable,’ an outsider, a shamed person. He is a victim of both the physical ailment and the social and religious system based upon distinctions of clean and unclean, insider and outsider, honored and shamed – and he is on the losing end of all the dichotomies.”²

So, his request is to be made clean – to be healed in body, *and* to be restored to his community. When Jesus responds “I want to,” he touches him, and heals his body. In doing so, Jesus himself becomes figuratively “unclean” in the eyes of the religious community. That is why he can no longer go into cities and towns in that area anymore – when the man healed from his disease spreads the word, everyone knows what Jesus has done – touched an unclean man. It is a powerful testimony in and of itself – his original testimony “I want to” results in a testimony of solidarity – Campbell writes, “Jesus takes upon himself the identity of the ‘other’: Jesus embodies solidarity with all who are the victims of deathly systems and institutions that exclude.”³

For Jesus, the consequence of his testimony is one that only deepens his ministry and the power of his gospel message – the dispossessed, the untouchables of society, and the oppressed receive power from the love and action of God.

Jesus *chose* the change, *wanted* the change in his life. He accepted the change that each person he healed brought to his life when he responded to them saying, explicitly or implicitly, “I want to.” Though it might seem worse for him at first, in actuality it only served to make his message more powerful, his mission more successful.

So, what about you? How do you give testimony to your desire for God’s presence and action in your life? How do you let others impact you and make your mission more successful?

This last week I read a devotional written by Rev. Quinn Caldwell on a similar subject. The devotional is titled “Prophet,” based on the scripture Deuteronomy 18:18 that reads, “*I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.*” Caldwell’s devotional reads:

“One of the three points of my church’s mission statement is “Welcoming All.” Maybe yours has a similar commitment. We work hard on ours. Probably you do, too (please tell me you do; we need your church to survive).

“I am convinced that this is what God wants us to do, but I sometimes think we might do

² Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, Year B

³ Ibid.

it for the wrong reason. Or at least for only half of the right reasons. Mostly, we talk about the importance of welcoming people in terms of those who might be out there wandering in the wilderness, those who might be wounded and in need of balm or hungry and in need of real food, those who have never heard about the deep beauty of life with God. We talk about it in terms of what we have that they might need. And of course that's a good start.

“There's another good reason to welcome all, though: enlightened self-interest. I think at least half the reason to welcome all is that you never know which passerby might be a prophet. You never know which might have something from God that will heal you, or save you, or balance the budget, or change you forever, or bring you home. For that matter, given that God has promised to return one day (and given that so many missed it the first time around), one of the people standing outside those big doors of yours and wondering whether to come in could be God. Can you really afford to not welcome *God*?”⁴

What could happen if we say “I Want To” when people come to us, not only looking for wholeness, but also looking to be a valuable part of community, to *contribute*? To say “I want to”, and to know that there will be consequence to that testimony of desire for God’s action in our lives and in the lives of those we might impact?

When we say “I want to,” there will be consequences. Some of those consequences could drastically change our lives. But if God is a part of them, the change will only be for better – better for the world, better for your life.

In the centering prayer class I’m taking right now, the leader, in describing to us some of the point of this particular prayer practice, suggested to us: “Do you want to be in control, or do you want to be free? Let go, and see what happens.” Father Thomas Keating, one of the founders of the Centering Prayer Movement that is a part of the larger, millennia-old practice of Contemplative Prayer, says, ‘Contemplative prayer is the world in which God can do anything. To move into that realm is the greatest adventure. It is to be open to the Infinite and hence to infinite possibilities. Our private, self-made worlds come to an end; a new world appears within and around us and the impossible becomes an everyday experience.’⁵

When you say “I want to,” both to God’s call in your life and to those who ask if you would share with them the power of community, you are opening yourself to the power of God’s ability to do anything. Amen.

⁴ http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_prophet

⁵ Keating, Thomas. *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 20th edition, p. 11.