

Ordinary 6B - February 10-11, 2018
A Chorus of Frogs by James McCrea
Mark 1:40-45

Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess who happened to come across an ugly frog. As things go in stories like this, it turned out to be a talking frog. So it hopped up to her and said, "Greetings, princess. I know you may be fooled by my appearance, but I'm not really a frog at all. An evil wizard has cast an enchantment on me and it can only be broken by a kiss from a princess. If you kiss me, I will turn back into a handsome prince." Well, of course, her first reaction was to check for hidden cameras since she didn't want to end up on some punked video on YouTube. But there were no cameras anywhere. So she looked again to be sure no one was watching, then she bent over and kissed the frog.

As you would imagine, that instantly generated a spark of lightning and a massive cloud of smoke. When that smoke cleared, it revealed — two frogs sitting side by side.

Sometimes our culture leads us to expect one thing so strongly that we're totally unprepared when events turn in a totally different direction. That's definitely the case with our Gospel lesson today.

At first glance, this appears to be yet another story of a healing by Jesus — the kind of story that would be absolutely unbelievable if it involved anybody else, but which seems almost routine when it comes to Jesus. However, this is not a routine healing.

Fear of leprosy was so strong that if anyone had a skin disease that could even vaguely be considered the onset of leprosy — even if it took a huge amount of imagination to do so — was considered to be a leper until they could prove for certain that they didn't have the disease. Therefore, when the Bible says that someone had "leprosy," it really means that they had some form of skin disease that might or might not have been Hansen's Disease.

But there's more to this tragic ostracism of lepers than merely the fear of spreading the disease. Leprosy was such a terrible and disfiguring illness

that it was thought to be a punishment from God. Therefore, those who suffered from the disease were both ritually unclean and were capable of making anyone who came into contact with them ritually unclean as well.

Here's how Don Hoffman describes their attitude, "Please understand: they [...] were concerned with the proper way to worship God. People who were clean could worship. People who were unclean couldn't. The idea is that God. Can't. Stand. Ugly.

"There is an old story that two High Priests of the Jerusalem temple got into a scuffle. The current High Priest bit the former High Priest on the ear, so that he would have a permanent scar, and never be permitted to be High Priest again.

The ancient Hebrews thought God can't stand ugly. God can't stand scars. God can't stand people who have touched blood. God can't stand psoriasis. At least, that's what they thought.

"Some forms of uncleanness could be fixed. If you had touched a dead body or a leper, you waited a set time and went through the right ritual washings to become clean again.

"If you had given birth to a baby, as Mary did to Jesus, you waited the set time and took the right sacrifice to the temple. If you were cured of your own leprosy you showed your fresh, unmarked skin to a priest, and waited the set time and went through the right rituals. Then you were pronounced clean, and they would let you in the temple again.

"[But] some forms of uncleanness could never be fixed. The High Priest with the scar was out of luck. The same was true for someone born blind or crippled. Notice that it wasn't morality they were concerned with but ickiness. They thought God didn't like icky things. That's why they couldn't eat bacon or shrimp. Entirely too icky.

All that serves as background for our gospel lesson this morning. It helps you to understand the desperation of the man who approached Jesus that day, asking to be healed. He had apparently heard of Jesus' reputation as a healer and he was willing to ignore all the regulations concerning lepers — he

was even willing to **put Jesus at risk of becoming unclean** — all in his single-minded quest for becoming whole again.

So he confronted Jesus with a significant choice when he says, "If you will, you can make me clean." It was as if he were saying, "**You can heal me — if you're willing to choose between me and your own freedom.**" And, of course, Jesus was willing. He was so willing that he didn't just say the words to have the man be healed; instead, he reached out his hand and touched the untouchable, healing the man's soul along with his body.

And that's when the story becomes really interesting, because the former leper doesn't obey Jesus' request to keep quiet about the source of his healing. And the result was that Jesus couldn't enter any of the local towns any more. In effect, **Jesus took the leper's place on the outside of the community.**

Now I've always assumed that the reason for that was that once people realized what a powerful healer he was, he was constantly surrounded by others demanding their own healings until the crowds refused to listen to him unless he met their demands for a miracles. In other words, this healing came at a real cost to Jesus. But I assumed that was a price he was willing to pay in order to show that God's love and healing power are extended to even the most wretched outcasts.

But what if that wasn't the point of our Gospel lesson? What if Mark is trying to tell us that Jesus could no longer enter the towns openly because he made people squeamish? What if, because Jesus dared to touch an unclean man, others now saw him as being unclean and didn't want to have anything to do with a contaminated man?

Not that that would be true of everyone, of course. There would always be plenty of people willing to go to Jesus because of his power and wisdom. But for others, by simply touching the leper — the definitive outsider — **Jesus became an outsider himself, and would eventually end up dying as an outsider, on a cross outside the city.**

We don't worry about ritual purity these days — in part because of Bible stories like this one. But we still have insiders and outsiders in our world.

And Jesus shows us that we are called to reach across any barriers that our culture — or our own squeamishness — may erect and show all people that they are deeply loved by God.

We're called to metaphorically kiss those ugly frogs even if that transforms us into ugly frogs as well. Or, perhaps I should say, even if it reveals that we, too, were ugly frogs all along whether we knew it or not. Perhaps the enchantment we're under is to believe that we're the handsome prince or beautiful princess and so we're somehow better than all the rest.

If we have the courage — or maybe just the wisdom — to let go of that illusion, we can become more like Jesus. Jesus reached out to touch the untouchable and offered him a new life, even if it transformed him into an untouchable himself.

Perhaps nowhere in our culture is more stratified into insiders and outsiders than high school, where it takes little more than a glance to tell who's in and who's not, although you can occasionally find a shape shifter, who will readily move between the two camps, largely because they reject those distinctions. As much as those on the outs may look forward to graduating and leaving their humiliation behind, the truth is that people never stop dividing the world into insiders and outsiders. We simply get more subtle about it as we grow older.

But those who pay attention will eventually realize that the goal of being an insider is a mirage that can never be totally realized since there's always another barrier inside the last barrier we've passed.

As one commentator says, "Whether we're dealing with being in a club, or politics, or church membership, becoming an insider is like finding the inside of an onion. There are always more layers to screen us out. Every group has an inner circle of movers and shakers. And every inner circle has another circle deeper inside it. So trying to be an insider becomes an addiction like gambling: 'If I can just get inside one more boundary, become part of the right inner group, I'll have it made.'"

The only real way to become an insider is to refuse to play the game — to become a shape shifter — that is, to be like Christ in putting the needs of others on an equal footing with your own needs. That's the way of God's

kingdom. By turning ourselves into outsiders alongside those we seek to help, we help to undercut the power of our cultural distinctions while we bring healing to their victims.

We are *God's* outsiders and our job isn't to bring others inside with us, but to show them that they are already inside, deeply loved by *God* because of who they are and in spite of what they may have done. We have been healed to love each other as *God* loves us.

That's what grace is really all about. So let's go out to live grace-filled lives with our eyes and our minds and our hearts wide open. Amen.