

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Mark 1:40-45

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40A man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

41Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" 42Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.

43Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: 44"See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." 45Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

The Unclaimed Baggage Center in Scottsboro, Alabama is a bargain shopper's heaven. This is the place where much of the unclaimed and lost luggage from many of the nation's airlines goes. The company contracts with major carriers like Delta, Northwest, and United to buy their unclaimed luggage at rock bottom prices. UBC, as the Unclaimed Baggage Center is known to insiders, then sorts and cleans up the items, making them available for sale in their giant warehouse and, lucky for those of us who aren't planning a trip to Alabama anytime in the near future, from their online store as well. Many a unique item has made its way through the UBC—a full set of metal body armor, a Jim Hansen puppet, and a 4.5 carat diamond solitaire to name a few. That's to say nothing for the thousands of half-filled containers of shampoo, vitamins, and deodorant. And yes, all of these lost and found items are fair game for UBC shoppers. One journalist who took a shopping trip through the SBC wrote of his experience, "You feel dirty even looking at things there, because they used to be someone else's, and that someone else never gave permission for their sale. It's one thing for them to sell things like lost books; it's another to sell baby clothes, jewelry, underwear - intimate items with intimate histories. I left the UBC feeling soiled. Even the books I bought made me feel like a thief, like I had just paid next to nothing not for a commodity, but for someone's memories." What was a nightmare to this journalist is probably a dream to the thrifty shopper. It surprises me that so much stuff ends up at the UBC. After all, the airlines hold onto the items for an average of 90 days and I wonder why folks don't work harder to get their things returned. Perhaps in our world of excess material goods and disposable this, that, and the other thing, it's easier to just have Delta Airlines cut you a check than it is to have them hunt down your personal belongings and deliver them to your doorstep. In fact, perhaps there's even a bit of a sense of relief that the items are gone—less to unpack, clean, and put away.

A friend of mine from Toastmasters gave a speech last year about this process of letting go and unloading our "baggage." She wasn't talking about half-used bottles of shampoo lost in the cargo bay of a 747, but rather she was referring to the spiritual discipline of detachment—that there is value in being able to separate yourself from things, situations, and people as you seek spiritual maturity. This is the principle behind monastic life—to live separate from the world and its temptations in order to commit oneself solely to the work of spiritual development and disciplines. The exercise she shared is from Joseph Campbell's book—*Reflections on the Art of Living*. He asks the reader to gather seven like objects—stones work well. Then each of the stones is labeled with the name and identity of someone or something you wouldn't want to live without. The next step is to imagine throwing those stones into a river one by one, never to be seen again. When there are no stones left—all that is left is you and God. This is the process of

detachment. And there is something to be said for at least imagining what we would be like in the absence of our earthly attachments.

Now I'm certainly not suggesting that we devoid ourselves of the people and things we hold most precious. For it is in the presence of such as these that we often feel most alive. Indeed, often I have felt the presence of God when experiencing the words and deeds of someone else. Surely we need these folks who are sometimes Christ to us as travel companions on our journey through life. What I am suggesting we do unload today is the baggage we don't really need and yet still carry with us on our faith journey. I'm suggesting that there are unresolved situations, broken relationships, and deep regrets that we need to just leave behind on the belt at baggage claim, letting them go round and round and round, never to be picked up and relieved from their dizzying journey.

Maybe it seems like a pipedream—just leaving something there for someone else to deal with, perhaps it's even irresponsible. Some of us are hesitant to lose anything, even if our lives would be a whole lot better without it. Along with saving money and resources, we save our hurts and wounds because we've grown somewhat comfortable with them and we're not sure who we would be without them. And so, instead of just leaving them behind, we pack them up with us wherever we go, burdening ourselves with the extra weight of our past. Some of us are prone to martyrdom or we have a victim's complex and we can't work our way out of those identities in order to embrace new identities and challenges. Many folks live with the philosophy that "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know."

But truth be told, this kind of thinking is antithetical to the Christian way of life. God did not send God's own beloved child to be our savior in order that we might just continue reliving the same old hurts and nursing long-ago inflicted wounds that we continue to pick at until they become an infection in our soul. No, God sent God's own beloved child so that we might have new life and the life everlasting. And this story from Mark's gospel is a wonderful illustration of the new life God intends for us through Jesus Christ.

Here we have a man living with leprosy. The condition is described as follows: Leprosy in Biblical times was a terrible thing. We're not exactly sure what Biblical leprosy was. While it may have described what is known today as "Hansen's Disease," the word probably included other skin diseases, as well. Whatever it was, once a person caught it, it was considered incurable, and those diagnosed with leprosy were banned from society. The Book of Leviticus describes how a Leper was to be treated: "The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:45-46).¹ Obviously, this was a man who needed the healing and new life Jesus has to offer. In fact, he wanted a new life, to be free from his dis-ease, so badly that he begged Jesus to heal him. He had the desire to be healed. And not only did he have the desire to be healed, he had the faith that Jesus had the power to do it. He says to Jesus, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." And Jesus' response is just what we hope for—"I am willing," he declares. "Be clean!" And thus begins the man's new life, as one who has been

¹ Dr. Ralph F. Wilson at www.jesuswalk.com

healed and made whole by the love of Jesus. This man formerly known as the leper left his baggage at Jesus' feet. He's ready to move on in life without it. And he's so happy about his healing that he disobeys Jesus' command to keep quiet and instead he goes out and tells the world his good news. Though we may be tempted to chastise him, can we really blame him for telling everyone he meets. It reminds me of that cereal commercial featuring the people going around telling everyone they see—perfect strangers included—that they've lowered their cholesterol. I know how they feel, I recently lowered my cholesterol by 64 points. You better bet I tell anyone who will listen, and even those who won't, about this dramatic change. And so yes, the guy disobeyed Jesus, but can we blame him when we'd likely do the same?

But whether or not the guy followed Jesus' instructions is not the point. The point is that he approached Jesus, he asked to be healed, he left his "baggage" with the divine baggage handler, Jesus our Savior, and then he moved forward in life, indeed experiencing new life by virtue of knowing Jesus.

Now, I feel compelled to offer a word of caution at this juncture. Anytime one speaks of miraculous healings such as this, it's treading on thin ice. There are plenty of folks who have done similar to the leper. They've come to Jesus in prayer, confessed belief in his healing power, and asked that they themselves be healed. And then they wait, and wait, and wait, for a cure that does not come. Let me be clear that I do not believe the lack of a cure is in any way related to the quality of the faith, belief, or petition of the person praying. Indeed, to be cured from anything at all is but a gift of grace. However, I am convinced that significant spiritual healing can and does occur even in the absence of physical healing. There is new life to be had in the oldest and most decrepit of bodies. This morning we're talking about the healing of our souls much more so than with the healing of our bodies.

And what about the healing of our souls? What about the spiritual and emotional baggage we've been carrying around that's weighing us down and holding us back? Are we ready to check it with that divine baggage handler Jesus and not go back to retrieve it? Can we let it go, allowing it to spiral out into the great cosmic Unclaimed Baggage Center?

Today we're going to try to do just that. This morning we're going to try to check a piece of our spiritual baggage with Jesus and just leave it behind with him, just as the man left his leprosy behind. Today we're going to take a step towards receiving God's healing grace.

So please join me as we ritualize the process of leaving behind some of our spiritual luggage. Take out one of the pieces of luggage from your bulletin—there are extras in the pews if you need one. Find something to write with—again, there are some extra pencils in the pews. Now, let's sit together in silence contemplating what we need to pack up and give to God. Perhaps it's regret at saying hurtful words years ago. Perhaps it's a "If only I had" you play over and over again in your head. Maybe it's a fight you had with a friend or a bad grade you got in school that you just can't stop worrying about. Ponder what it is you want to let go and get over as we sit together in silence for a bit.

Now write it down on the baggage slip. Don't put your name on it and rest assured that no one will read it. This is between you and God.

Hold your baggage slip in your hand and, just like the children do at the end of the children's message, repeat after me as we pray.

Dear God. I'm giving this over to you. I want to be healed and made new. Please take this baggage from me now. Amen.

And now wad up your baggage slip, tear it to pieces if you want. And as the travel cases come your way, turn in your baggage slip—it's not yours anymore. We're bringing it up to the altar and giving it to God—the Divine Baggage Handler, who will dispose of it properly. Indeed, the good news is that we are relieved of our burden, healed and made new through the love of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!