



A Sermon Preached at
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During the past few weeks of Epiphany we have learned from Mark's gospel about Jesus being baptized by St. John and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He recruited his disciples and started performing miracles. It was pretty clear that the disciples did not have an idea what they were getting into, nor did they understand what Jesus was trying to do. They were pretty impressed, however, at all of the miracles that they had witnessed, but I don't think they quite got what their role was supposed to be. Last week, for example, Jesus healed a woman with a fever, plus a few people with other various diseases, and he cast out demons. After performing the miracles of healing, Jesus, to the amazement of his disciples, disappeared. I can imagine that the disciples wanted Jesus to get on with performing more miracles, and to take advantage of the excitement that the healing had generated among the people. When they found Jesus, he was alone praying. He explained to them that his reason for coming to Galilee was to preach the Gospel.

Today we learned about Jesus cleansing the leper. In biblical times, lepers were outcasts: legally, religiously, and socially. Lepers were required to separate themselves from society and warn approaching people by crying

"unclean". No one would go near a leper and they certainly would not touch one – so unclean and outcast they were perceived to be.

When Jesus healed the leper, he, from the leper's perspective, performed two miracles: He cleansed him of his disease, and perhaps more significantly, he healed his spirit. Jesus' act of touching the leper, and his speaking to him was a powerful affirmation of the leper's innate dignity and worth; and it transformed him.

Instead of keeping quiet and going directly to the priest as Jesus had directed, he proclaimed the Gospel to all who would listen. And he was pretty good at it. The leper's proclamation of the Gospel was so effective that so many people came out of the cities to meet Jesus; he could not get to the cities. The leper got the message of proclaiming the Gospel in a way that the disciples had not yet discovered.

From this account, we learn of God's healing power - and that you don't have to be Jesus or a priest to proclaim the Gospel.

As Christians, we are all called to proclaim the Gospel – even we Episcopalians.

Trust me, you can do it.

You can perform miracles.

You can transform lives, and you will enrich your own life in the process.

A couple of weeks ago I watched the 1970's movie Papillon. It was a story about a Frenchman named Papillon, played by Steve McQueen, who had been wrongfully convicted of a crime and sent to the notorious French prison colony Devil's Island. In one scene, Papillon while trying to escape from the prison, finds himself in a leper colony. He tries to get the leader of the leper colony to help him further his escape. The leper, whose face is horribly disfigured, offers to share his cigar with Papillon. Afraid to offend the man, Papillon takes the cigar from the leper's stubby fingers, puts it in his mouth, and begins to puff on it. Visibly surprised, the leper asks "How did you know I have the dry form of leprosy, which isn't contagious?" Papillon replies, "I didn't."

This act of compassion both transformed the leper, and it saved Papillon's life. Papillon's according the lepers a small expression of dignity transformed the lepers. They told Papillon that they had intended to kill him, but because Papillon showed them respect and dignity they instead gave him money and helped him escape.

It's not easy for us to show or share God's love. We don't see so many lepers these days. We do, however, encounter outcasts - people who are separated from our society.

The way in which we treat outcasts can be a way of expressing God's love and proclaiming the Gospel.

I want to tell you how the Seamen's Church Institute proclaims the gospel and transforms lives every day through its ministry to the world's merchant mariners.

In many ways merchant mariners are outcasts. By the nature of their work, they travel from port to port and they are usually strangers everywhere they go. Most of them are foreigners: Filipinos, Russians, Ukrainians, Indians and citizens of many other countries - mostly from developing countries. They are subject to discrimination, they are treated as security risks, they are denied shore leave in many ports, and they are subject to unfair criminal prosecutions because, as strangers, they are convenient scapegoats when things go wrong in ports.

Ironically, seafarers do not fit the stereotypes are perceptions of most people who do not know them. They are highly trained, responsible, hard working people whose efforts are unknown to most of us who depend upon them for almost everything we consume. They bring to us more than 90% of all of the goods that we Americans consume. They transport more than 80% of the world's commerce. They are key member so the teams that protect maritime and port security. Yet, they are either invisible to most Americans or treated with suspicion.

Our ministries at the Seamen's Church Institute are devoted to them. We do not treat seafarers as objects of charity. Rather, we honor them for the

contributions they make to our lives and, more fundamentally, show them the respect and dignity that is often so lacking in their lives.

One of the fundamental components of the Seamen's Church Institutes ministry is our chaplaincy program. I see our chaplains transforming seafarers' lives every day through simple acts of hospitality. Our chaplains welcome seafarers at our Seafarers' Center in Port Newark; the Passenger Ship Terminals in Brooklyn and Manhattan; Paducah, Kentucky; and Houston, Texas. They visit seafarers on their ships in the Port of New York and on the rivers of our nation's heartland. For many merchant mariners, SCI's centers are their home away from home, and SCI's port chaplains are their friends and family in a strange land. Chaplains take seafarers shopping, visit them in hospitals, provide Internet and telephone services so that seafarers can stay in contact with their families, and when seafarers have problems or in times of crisis, SCI's port chaplains are often the only ones providing seafarers a friendly helping hand. Just last week our chaplains went aboard a ship in Port Newark that had no heat. The crew was bundled up in layers of clothing under the only source of heat on the vessel, incandescent light bulbs. The crew told them that the ship's heating system would be repaired in their next port; which happened to be China! At least it will be warm when we go through the Panama Canal they said. Through the help of CSR, the Coast Guard was discretely alerted to the problem and repairs were made without jeopardizing the crew (who are sometimes subject to retaliation for simply demanding their rights).

Another of SCI's programs is providing advanced and highly specialized training for inland captains and pilots at our Paducah, KY and Houston, TX training facilities. Utilizing adult education principles, sophisticated simulation technology, and instruction and curriculum of the highest quality, SCI courses meet the advanced training needs of the skilled and knowledgeable professional mariners that pass through our doors. This training helps seafarers change their lives by improving their professional skills and advancing their shipboard careers. The training has also dramatically improved commercial vessel safety on the inland rivers of our nation. Our training centers in Paducah and Houston have also spawned a new form of ministry that did not exist before. We now have chaplains ministering to mariners on the interior rivers of the United States and enlisting the help of churches of many denominations along the rivers to provide pastoral care and friendship to the mariners working the rivers.

Throughout most of its 175 year history, the Seamen's Church Institute has been an advocate for the rights of seafarers. Some of the earliest US legislation designed to protect seafarers was enacted in response to SCI's legislative initiatives. The Center for Seafarers' Rights is today's advocacy program at SCI. It is the only free legal aid program devoted exclusively to the world's merchant mariners in the world – and its part of the Episcopal Church. CSR's staff of lawyers provides direct legal assistance to merchant mariners and port chaplains worldwide. We train port chaplains, law students, and the marine industry about seafarers' rights. Our work is local and international. We

connect with the lowest ranking seafarers from the poorest countries as well as with the highest government authorities in the richest countries. For example, just in the past two weeks, I have presented a paper on human values to an international conference of marine engineers in Mumbai, I delivered a speech to a maritime security conference in Washington explaining how our security is enhanced by treating seafarers with respect and dignity, and I just returned from Houston where I lectured on seafarers' advocacy to an international chaplains' course. We are part of the discussions on responding to the threats from modern day piracy, and we are working with the United States government to set international requirements that would prevent seafarers from being abandoned in foreign ports – a growing concern in this economic crisis. At the same time we have assisted several individual seafarers with a variety of problems including getting medical care, being paid wages, and being abandoned in Baltimore. We are voice of justice for mariners who often do not have a voice.

These are just a few ways that the Seamen's Church Institute is proclaiming the Gospel to the world's merchant mariners – people who are often outcasts from our societies ashore, yet are so vital to our lives. We honor them, not just for their accomplishments, but in recognition of their innate worth and dignity. When seafarers come to our port they are sometimes afraid, lonely, and dispirited. When our port chaplains welcome these seafarer strangers in our midst, it not only transforms their lives, but ours as well.

The Seamen's Church Institute is just one example of how the Episcopal Church is proclaiming the Good News of God's love. I know that many of you at St. John's have been wonderful partners in ministry with us through your time, talent and financial support. We greatly appreciate your help. At the same time I am certain that those of you who have joined us in our ministry have been enriched by the experience.

You too can proclaim the Gospel, and you can change lives - but it's not easy to know how to do it.

There is a mandate, erroneously attributed to St. Francis, that gives us some direction:

Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.

Jesus touched the leper. He cleansed him, and he transformed him.

I ask you to remember the world's seafarers. Keep them in your prayers. Help me and the Seamen's Church Institute honor seafarers by raising their stature to a level commensurate to their contributions to our lives and economy.

Amen.