This is a phrase that is said with great regularity in this beautiful sanctuary. We say our “I do’s” at baptisms, at weddings, at the end of confirmation and in services ordination.

I hate to start things off on a skeptical note, but I often wonder if we really know what we are committing to when we say “I do.” I wonder this in large part because far too often after these words are uttered and the excitement and spectacle of a touching day is done; parents and their newly baptized children disappear, weddings end quickly in divorce and we all know what happens when confirmation is over; right?!

Those kids disappear until the time comes for them to baptize their own children and get married – Hopefully not in that order.

Now just last week the deacons and elders said quite a litany of “I do’s” right there in the front of the chancel. At one point they were asked, I think I might have even asked the question, “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do? Do you?” To which they all replied, “I do.”

Show of hands—who can name the essential tenets of the Reformed faith? To be honest, it would be quite a struggle for me to name the essential tenets of the Reformed faith off the top of my head. I’m not even completely sure I remember how many there are. I think there are 10; right?

This morning in our Scripture lesson we will hear Jesus say a very important “I do.” However, in all the excitement and spectacle of the story we will read it can be very easy for us misunderstand what Jesus is committing to.

Our lesson for this morning comes to us for the Gospel according to Mark at the very end of chapter 1. An extraordinary amount of events have already taken place in this first chapter. Mark begins with John the Baptist calling people to repentance, then Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River, followed quickly by the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus returns from the wilderness to proclaim the Good News of the kingdom and call his disciples. But that’s not all; there is still more in chapter one. Jesus also casts out an unclean spirit, heals Simon’s mother in law and at the very end the first chapter Jesus cleanses a Leper. This is the story we are about to read.

So, let us turn now to the Gospel according Mark chapter 1. I will begin reading at verse 40. Together let us listen for a word from God and a commitment from the ever-living Christ.

(Read Mark 1.40-45) The Word of the Lord…Thanks be to God.

It is funny to me how the “miracle stories” from the Bible so often generate really strong feelings in people. On one extreme the response is often, “You have to believe the miracle stories! That is what faith in Christ is all about!” And on the other extreme the response is often, “You cannot believe the miracle stories! That is what being a modern Christian is all about!”

Personally, being a post-modern Christian, I think both extremes miss the point.
I need to stop here and give a quick warning to those of you who might have by chance been here this past summer, I am about to plagiarize part of my sermon from August. If what I say next sounds vaguely familiar that’s because I’ve said it before. Anyone who was not here this past August, feel free to disregard that warning.

Okay back to the sermon.

Personally, being a post-modern Christian, I think both extremes miss the point. So to help move us beyond the exciting spectacle of this story to the deeper meaning, I want to take a moment to affirm whatever you might believe. If you believe Jesus literally healed the Leper, I affirm your belief in miraculous healing. If you do not believe Jesus literally healed the Leper, I affirm your DISbelief in miraculous physical healing.

If you want to know what I think, I’m sorry, I can’t tell you. Jesus sternly warned me to say nothing to anyone about my miraculous healing.

So what is the point I believe these two groups miss about this story?

This story is not about Jesus healing a Leper. Physical healing is at the very best secondary in importance. In fact, if we can get beyond the miraculous healing in this story, the very core of the Gospel lies waiting for us to discover. But you may still be asking in yourself, “With the healing of the Leper so clearly in view, why on earth would Chad suggest such a thing this morning?” Because the Leper did not ask to be healed and Jesus did not say “I do choose. Be healed.”

The Leper came to Jesus and said, “If you choose, you can make me CLEAN.” And Jesus responds, “I do choose! Be made CLEAN.”

Being clean or unclean had profound ramifications in ancient Judaism. According to the Torah, the Jewish Law, “The person who has a leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

To be unclean was to be marked as a social pariah: unwanted, unwelcome, untouchable. If you had leprosy you were marked by your appearance, you were commanded to live alone and you were made to go about your life crying out to everyone your status as unacceptable or maybe even worse you were made to cry out to no one but yourself that all of society had judged you unacceptable.

It is one thing to be sick. It is quite another to be untouched, unloved, isolated, worthless and alone. Think about it. If you had the choice between being sick or being completely isolated, which would you choose? In fact let me stretch that thought even further: Would you rather be sick and surrounded by people who love and support you or perfectly healthy and yet rejected, unloved and alone?

This story is not about miraculous physical healing. This story is about something much more miraculous: the restoration, renewal, and reestablishment of a human being who had been cast aside and left behind as so much human waste. This story is about reconciliation – it is a story about Jesus reaching out to touch and make acceptable all those who desire to be made clean – to welcome them in the transforming presence of Christ, to be welcome them even here in this place to the body of Christ.

In my opinion that is the core of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul put it so eloquently in his second letter to the Corinthians, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away;
see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

This is also why I believe Jesus told the Leper to shut up about his healing. Jesus knew we might be prone to fixating on the miraculous physical healing and, perhaps, in doing so fail to see the true miracle taking place.

I cannot say that every time we ask for physical healing God is going to say yes. But I can say with absolute confidence every time we ask to be made clean – to be reconciled – God always answer yes, “I do choose. Be made clean!” It is my prayer that we, the Body of Christ, will always say yes to reaching out, to touching and making clean all those who are considered unclean, the Lepers of our world today.

Anne Lamott tells the story of a miracle at her church. This story involves a man named Ken Nelson who was dying of AIDS.

Ken had started coming to Anne’s church shortly before his partner had died. A few weeks later Ken told the church that right after Brandon died, Jesus had slid into the hole in his heart that Brandon’s loss had left, and Jesus had been there ever since. Ken had a totally lopsided face, ravaged and emaciated, but when he smiled, he was radiant. Ken said that he would gladly pay any price for what he had at that moment, which was Jesus and the church.

There was also a woman named Ranola, at Anne’s church, who is a large, beautiful, jovial, black woman as devout as she can be, who had been a little standoffish toward Ken. She always looked at him with confusion, when she looked at him at all. Ranola had been raised in the South by Baptists who taught her that his way of life, that he, was an abomination.

On one particular Sunday morning Ken was so weak he could not even stand up. During the first hymn when everyone stood, he sang away sitting down, with the hymnal in his lap. When it can time for the second hymn they sang “His eye is on the Sparrow.” Again the whole congregation had risen to sing, except for Ken. As they began to sing, “Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?” Ranola watched Ken rather skeptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up, to touch him the white rag doll he had become, and they sang together.

Then they both began to cry. Tears were running down their faces, their noses were running like rivers, and as she held him, she suddenly lay her black weeping face against his feverish white face and let all those spooky fluids mingle with hers.

Friends, the true miracle in this life is not physical healing; the true miracle is reconciliation. Because if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. So we are Christ’s ambassadors of reconciliation in the world.

Do you commit yourself to the ministry of reconciliation? Do you?

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1 Stolen from “Aquaphobia” preached August 10, 2008 by Chad Miller
2 Leviticus 13:45-46
3 Adapted from Traveling Mercies, Anne Lamott, Pantheon Books, 1999
4 II Corinthians 5:18-19