

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Being God’s People: Telling”  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
February 4, 2018

Mark 1:40-45

My friend almost lost it. It was years ago when I was in the Peace Corps and one of my housemates and I were traversing Manila in a jeepney. A jeepney is a jeep looking vehicle with an extended covered bed with benches on each side of the bed. People pay a fare and hop on and off as the jeepney runs its set route. We were on the Jeepney, packed in with a about a dozen people, with two Filipinas sitting next to my right-hand side. I could hear them discussing the hair on my arms. Then the Filipina closest to me, reached over and began feeling the hair on my arm, all the while giving a commentary to her friend. Then her friend reached over and did the same thing. Then they continued their conversation. My friend was stunned. He gasped, in a whispered voice, “How could you let them touch you like that?” My response was, “They have a very small sense of personal space.” So how many of you would have been a bit uncomfortable with what the woman sitting next to me did? I would assume this includes the majority of you and that makes sense because we Americans have a large sense of personal space.

For the children in the room this morning, I want you to think of personal space as an invisible force-field that we adult place around ourselves. We have this force-field and we don’t want people getting too close to us, or to put it another way, up in our face. We see someone up in our face as being rude and domineering. There is a great story of an American business man visiting a nation in the far east where their force fields are almost nonexistent and the closer the host moved toward him, the further he moved away until he almost fell off a balcony. We have large senses of personal space; large force fields. What is interesting is that our force fields operate not only in physical space but in emotional space. They surround our inner life keeping it safe from inquiries from the outside. Someone asks, “How are you.” Our force fields are activated and we say, “Just fine”, even when we feel our life is not good at all. Someone else asks about our faith, the force field goes up and we say something like, “My faith is really personal.” We protect our faith and religious beliefs, working hard to keep others out of them.

This is one reason that we like Jesus so much in this morning’s story. He has begun his ministry and is out healing and teaching. He comes upon a man who had leprosy. The man begs to be healed and believes that Jesus can do it. Jesus, feeling compassion for the man, reaches out and touches him and the man is healed (As an aside, Jesus never had a large sense of personal space. His force-field was always down for those in need.). At that point Jesus tells the man to go see the priest in order to receive a clean religious bill of health and then, and this is what we

love, not to tell anyone what Jesus had done. Thank goodness, we say to ourselves. We can keep our inner faith-force fields up and running so that we don't have to tell anyone else about what God has done for us. We don't have to get up on anyone's business and make them uncomfortable. At the same time, we feel some relief and are also made just a bit nervous when Mark tells us that the man doesn't listen to Jesus but goes off and begins to tell everyone he meets about the amazing thing that Jesus had done for him. At least, we think, we listen to Jesus.

Well I hate to break it to you this morning, but we are supposed to be like the man cleansed from leprosy. We are supposed to go out and tell. We are not sure why Jesus told the man not to tell. Maybe Jesus didn't want to become known solely as the miracle worker from Nazareth. Maybe he didn't want the crowds to become so large that he would be unable to teach effectively. We are not sure, but if we let the story itself speak to us, we see that Mark offers the healed man as an example of how we are to respond to the wonderful things that God does for us. At this moment I think I can hear your faith-force field generators cranking up. They are whirring out the messages of, "I will never be one of those people who goes up to strangers and asks, 'Are you saved?'" Nor will I be one who passes out religious tracts on street corners, or who walks around saying things like, "Praise Jesus. Can I tell you about him?" We don't want to be one of those people who "tells." Except that is what we are supposed to be. To be God's people means to be a people who tell. Who tell others about what God has done for us in Jesus.

Before your faith-force fields become concrete barriers, let me explain what I don't mean when I say we are to tell. I don't mean that we are to tell people what they should or must believe. I don't mean that we are to stand on street corners and preach, like the guy who stands in front of the Alamo in San Antonio, telling passersby that they are lost if they don't believe in Jesus. I don't mean button holing people at work or on the playground to convince them to believe in Jesus. These things are not what the man did. The man simply told people about how good God had been to him through the healing work of Jesus. The man simply told his story to those who needed to hear it. This is what it means to tell. It means to drop our faith-force fields long enough to share our story of what Jesus has done for us with those who drop their faith-force fields as they search for comfort, meaning and purpose. Telling can be as simple as listening to and praying with someone. It can be as simple as inviting someone to church where they can hear how God transforms lives. It can be as simple as sharing a time when your life was changed because of your faith. It can be all of these and more.

My challenge to you this morning is this, to ask yourselves, how open am I to telling others what God has done for me in Jesus Christ, that they might find the same can be true for them?