

“Rethinking Life: Practice Proximity”
Mark 1:40-45

I recently listened to an NPR interview with estate planning lawyers who were offering advice on prioritizing relationships over mere assets when it comes to family legacies. They suggested a compelling allocation of time: **60% on building family trust and communication, 25% on preparing heirs to be kind and caring, and 10% on aligning family values and mission.** Strikingly, they advised spending **only 5% of time on the mechanical aspects of estate planning**—like interest rates, mortgages, and investment accounts. This wisdom isn't just for wealthy families; it applies to all of us.

The lawyers shared a memorable example: Lewis Osterman, an estate planning lawyer in Denver, had clients, a brother and sister, who were locked in a dispute.

LEWIS OSTERMAN: "The biggest issue that we had to iron out was who was going to get Dad's vacuum."

HERSHIPS (interviewer): "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. A vacuum cleaner. Like a Hoover, like the kind you clean your house with?"

OSTERMAN: "Yeah—not even, like, a Dyson. I don't think it was a nice one."

WONG (interviewer): "No, it's precious."

This wasn't the kind of problem Lewis wanted to bring before a judge.

OSTERMAN: "So we went into the conference room. Sister had a lawyer. And at my hourly rate, she brought the vacuum. We put it on the table. We transferred it over to brother."

HERSHIPS: "So what was the bill for the vacuum transfer?"

OSTERMAN: "I think it was about 3- to \$4,000 in attorney time. I'm still kind of beside myself about it."

HERSHIPS: "That's—wow. That is nuts."

WONG: "And here is where we get into our old friend, behavioral economics, and, you know, the concept of rational actors. You know, people don't always make decisions you might call rational, especially if they're feeling stressed or emotional."

This story might seem irrational from a financial standpoint, but it makes perfect emotional sense. The vacuum cleaner, in this context, wasn't just an appliance; it was a symbol of a cherished relationship, of connection, of belonging. Even when our focus is

misplaced, we instinctively know that our relationships make an enormous difference in our lives.

If we are to be people who allow God's compassion to flourish in and through us, we must be willing to **prioritize relationships**, especially with those on the margins of society. If we want to truly make a difference, we have to expand our compassion to reach out. Our compassion is about people, not just abstract issues. That's why we need to **practice proximity** to others in their time of need.

Today's Bible story from Mark 1:40-45 provides a powerful example of Jesus practicing proximity to someone ostracized by society due to illness. The story centers on a nameless man, known only to us as "a leper"—a label that stripped him of his individuality. In his society, he was seen as an outsider, despised, and ignored.

During that historical period, and according to the laws of purification in Leviticus chapters 13 and 14, and later in the Jewish Mishnah, there were detailed teachings about how to deal with skin diseases. Priests and rabbis were designated to inspect such illnesses to manage contagious diseases. If a priest determined someone's skin disease was contagious, that person would be isolated from society. Re-entry was possible but required proper protocols. These religious leaders were, in essence, practicing community healthcare. We can certainly understand this from our own experiences with COVID-19.

The profound problem arose when people with contagious diseases became nameless, were treated as outsiders, despised, and stripped of their rights and their human significance. Society excluded them from any social circles of support. We might say today, "Oh well, they just didn't know any better." But this pattern of human behavior, rooted in fear and indifference, repeats itself throughout history. People are victimized by the fears or indifference of the majority. Whether it's mental illness, aging, cultural or religious identity, or other human labels we create, people suffer. The only true cure is reconnecting with our innate, God-given capacity to care and to connect.

Let's see how Jesus demonstrated this. Let's listen to Mark 1:40-45 (NRSVUE):

40 A man with a skin disease came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I am willing. Be made clean!" 42 Immediately the skin disease left him, and he was made clean. 43 After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 44 saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them." 45 But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the

word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly but stayed out in the country, and people came to him from every quarter.

It's fascinating to observe Jesus' profound reaction. In verse 41, the original Greek text for "moved with pity" (*splagchnizomai*) literally means "having one's intestines turn"—a visceral, gut-wrenching response. Even if we choose the translation "moved with pity," it implies more than simple sympathy. Jesus felt intense emotion in response to the condition of this nameless man with leprosy, who had been objectified and oppressed by the religious authorities.

Then, Jesus did the unthinkable: **He stretched out his hand and touched the leper.** This act would have endangered him in multiple ways—exposure to illness, loss of status, and ritual impurity. Yet, Jesus touched him, and immediately, the man was healed. But Jesus didn't stop there. He sent him back to the priest, and in turn, back to the whole community. He sent him back to **reconnect with community**. Instead of simply sending a message about the "issue" of compassion for lepers, Jesus focused on **a person**. Jesus knew that the way to changing hearts and minds was through **relationships**.

In his book, *Rethinking Life*, Shane Claiborne writes, "I don't know too many people who changed their minds because they lost an argument. I don't know many people who have been talked into thinking differently. But I do know tons of people who have been moved in their hearts, and then their heads followed. I know many people who have been 'storied in' to new thinking, and even more who have been moved by relationships, especially with those whose lives are affected by issues of life and death or injustice and racism. When it comes to repairing the foundation of life, one of the biggest challenges too many of us face is a lack of proximity...Mother Teresa was one of my early role models in practicing proximity. She used to say, 'It may be very fashionable to talk about the poor, but not as fashionable to talk to them.'"

Think of examples in your own life where relationships helped you understand things differently. How did that work? How do you intentionally practice proximity today? What are some barriers that get in your way? Where have you experienced that kind of support in your life when you felt isolated from others?

I recently received a powerful letter from one of our neighbors from when we lived in Bend, Oregon. This letter was a profound testimony to how powerful relationships and proximity to suffering can be. I knew this woman first through our church, and then as a neighbor whose daughter played with ours. She experienced a major mental health crisis that led to trouble with the criminal justice system. I had no idea of the profound impact my proximity had on her life until recently. Here's some of what she wrote:

"I am writing to thank you. I have been in a Bible study this year and one topic was God's interventions in our lives. I have been blessed and loved by Jesus for years. Roula, at a very difficult time in my life you showed up. You may or may not remember I was called to attend a meeting regarding a legal charge that occurred during my suicide attempt. Writing that feels crazy, so long ago. At the meeting a man was attempting to make a deal with me about probation. My mind was a bit chaotic. You went with me. You stated, 'She is not making a deal,' and we left. You helped me get in touch with an attorney. I attended Mental Health Court, and charges were expunged. I attended extensive therapy which brought great healing. I was encouraged to go back to school. I eventually graduated with a Master of Social Work. I went on to become a mental health therapist. I have been in this role for the past 12 years. It has been a gift. What a privilege to sit with people, hear their stories and help them to find healing. Roula, without your help all of those years ago, none of that would have been possible. Thank you. God continues His work in me. I found you on the internet and saw how He uses you. More than anything in my life I am most thankful to be saved by Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit...I will keep you, your family, and your church in my prayers. If ever you need anything, just ask."

This is the incredible **power of proximity and relationships!** This story beautifully illustrates how a simple act of showing up, of being present in someone's difficult moment, can ripple outwards to transform a life, leading to healing, purpose, and even a calling to help others.

Just as the estate lawyers advise prioritizing relationships over assets, and as Jesus modeled radical proximity, we are called to lean into the messiness and beauty of human connection. The truth of God's love is revealed not just in grand gestures, but in the quiet, consistent act of being present for one another, especially for those who feel unseen or unheard.

This week let's commit to rethinking how we live, by consciously practicing proximity. Let's ask ourselves:

- **Who in my life or community might be feeling isolated or on the margins?**
- **What small, tangible step can I take to draw closer to them, to truly see and hear them?**
- **How can I, like Jesus, extend a hand of compassion and connection, even when it feels challenging or inconvenient?**

May we all be instruments of God's healing presence through the transformative power of proximity. Amen.