

In this moment, I want you to think about anyone in our community, in our society, anyone in North Vancouver who, by virtue of their illness, is perceived to be something less than the rest of us...at least according to the culture.

A number of years ago it was SARS in Toronto...remember?

In the early years of the last century it was tuberculosis? How many remember?

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Black Death, or bubonic plague killed between 30 and 60% of Europe's working population.

What about today? Who, because they are sick, is cut off from the rest of our society?

- mental illness? Used to be we kept them at an institution like Riverview Hospital, but we have since simply released them into the culture. Many have ended up in places like the downtown eastside.

- HIV/Aids? In the 80s, HIV was a death sentence, and a misunderstood death sentence. It was referred to as the gay cancer. We wouldn't even have dying aids patients in our hospitals; many died at home with no support. Now with the incredible research and scientific developments, to be HIV positive is no longer a death sentence and if treated soon enough, people live reasonably normal, healthy lives. But still, there is a stigma attached. What do you know when you meet someone who is HIV positive?

- I've asked this question in some circles and have heard a particularly troubling response – seniors. I've heard our society described as an ageist society. We isolate seniors in care facilities, in gated communities, and locked units.

In the text Ray read for us today, Jesus, a practicing Jew, deeply immersed in the tribal laws of the Torah and the judgment of the Prophets, is confronted with a leper. A leper, who by virtue of his disease is separated from his community, is required to wear torn clothing as a visible sign of being unclean. By tribal law, he is required to call out to passersby "Unclean, unclean" warning everyone within earshot that he is to be separated from his people.

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Do you notice the language here? He's on his knees, he's begging. Can you imagine having to yell out as you walk down the street – unclean, unclean?

The rest of the world sees you as condemned by God. He's on his knees before Jesus; how many times have you been confronted by someone on the street, on his knees begging for handouts?

If you choose, he says. He puts this challenge right in Jesus' face. If you choose, you can make me well. You can make me clean. You can restore me to my community. You can give back my dignity, my personhood, my humanity. If you choose.

Huge. Wow...what a confrontation.

I loved War Horse. I loved it. I'm a sucker for Hollywood's capacity to tell a story. I'm a sucker for dramatic, over the top lighting. I'm a sucker for dramatic music scores. I'm a sucker for stunning cinematography. And I fall for the romantic, schmaltzy story line that unites a father to his son in unspoken words of understanding and compassion. Steven Spielberg knows how to tell a story, he just does. Spielberg knows the medium, he knows his audience, he knows the technology to create something incredible without hurting a soul.

And in my mind, this movie is also about choices. What do the characters do with a horse? And equally, what does the horse do with the characters. It's really quite a journey. Some of have turned up their noses saying War Horse is simply Black Beauty set in world war one Europe. And perhaps that's so. How many have seen the movie?

The movie follows the life of a horse – born in an English country hay field to a fiercely protective mare. He is a majestic animal; red brown with dark brown tail and mane, four white socks and a white star on his forehead. When he is just a yearling, he is brought to the auction. Farmer Narracott, a veteran of the Boar War, takes one look this magnificent animal and makes the choice to buy him at an unheard of price of 30 guineas. His wife is stunned, shocked and angry. She chooses to continue stay by his side, even though the purchase of this horse threatens their lives and their livelihood. Narracott has spent the family coffers for a horse, that can't work.

Albert, Narracott's son chooses to train the horse, to build a relationship with the horse, whom he names Joey, to nurture and love the horse regardless of what may come. It is a romantic, tender, lovely relationship that Spielberg captures beautiful throughout the movie.

Even when they're not together, we are haunted in every scene by the memory of this gentle relationship between a young man and his horse. The relationship infiltrates every scene when all the characters make choices about what to do with Joey, the horse. A British soldier chooses to buy Joey to use him in battle. The soldier dies in battle, Joey escapes and a young French girl chooses to hide Joey from German soldiers in her bedroom. Joey is discovered anyway, but the German horsehandler chooses to enlist another horse to its death to protect Joey.

The movie depicts World War One in ways I've not seen before. I've not ever seen the trenches, the barbed wire, the gas, the rats, depicted so graphically. When Joey tries to escape the smell of the gas, the noise of the explosions and the heat of the fires, he ends up in what was referred to as "no man's land," a mess of barbed wired, wooden stocks, mud and the smell of death. In his terror, Joey becomes trapped in the barbed wire, and mud, and his imminent death if nothing happens.

If you choose, you can make me well.

A British soldier makes a choice; he wanders into no man's land with a white flag, indicating a request for cease fire. A German soldier makes the same choice.

What is it about humankind's relationship to animals that would compel us to wander into No Man's Land to release a horse, when we can't even drop a loonie into some one's cup on Granville Street, or Main Street? If you choose, you can make me well.

A German soldier, a British soldier and a horse, in No Man's Land. The German soldier asks for more wire cutters from his side, and ten pairs come flying into the air. Together, these two enemies work slowly and methodically to cut the barbed wire that is cutting into the skin of the magnificent and broken War Horse. The horse is released, but what side of the barbed wire will he be returned to? The two soldiers decide by the flip of a coin, a German coin. Heads or Tails. The British soldier calls it and wins. Joey returns to the British forces. Both men shake hands. They agree to wait 30 minutes before they start shooting at each other again.

If you choose? You can make me clean. You can make me well. If you choose.

In the end, in a rather circuitous fashion, Joey is returned to Albert. Their reunion happens in a soldier's hospital somewhere in the streets of small town France.

Both return home to the pastoral British countryside where mother is reunited with son by a loving embrace, and father is reunited with son by a common understanding of why the scourges of war can never be spoken.

Friends, if we're listening, life calls us to make choices. And usually, the choices that call us beyond our safety and comfort are the choices that transform us. They're the choices that help us to become the ones we're meant to be. The choices that take us past the false sense of security and safety, the choices that take us beyond what we've always done, are the choices that bring healing and wholeness. May we be empowered to make those changes for the healing of our world. Amen.