

Jesus gets mad

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Years ago I read an article in *Interpretation* that forever changed my understanding of this gospel passage. The writer focused on the alternate reading in verse 41—a reading so alternate that some Bibles don't even list it in the footnotes. Here's the question: what did Jesus feel as he healed the leper?

First, some context. It is just after the big night in Capernaum when Jesus healed many in town, including Peter's mother-in-law. The next morning, while everyone else is sleeping it off, Jesus gets up and goes to pray in a "deserted place"—a wilderness, an idea rich with associations. On this particular morning the temptations Jesus faces may be only distraction and pride. But prayer defends him, helps him defeat these spiritual enemies, so that when Peter and the rest come to find him—"hunting him down"—he is able to say with authority that he is not going back to Capernaum but "on to the neighboring villages" in order to "proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do."

Now today we get the story of the leper. After having contact with a leper, Jesus cannot go into the neighboring villages—cannot do what he has come to do—for at least two reasons. The first is that physical contact with the man makes Jesus ritually unclean and therefore unwelcome in the villages. Second, Jesus "sternly ordered the man" to be silent, just as he ordered the demon in the synagogue, but unlike the demon, the leper blabs about his healing (proving both that Jesus cannot control human behavior and that people are often not as obedient as demons).

As a result of his encounter with the leper, Jesus can no longer do what he intended to do.

Yes, people will come to him in the countryside, but he won't be able to enter a town.

Now the traditional translation of [verse 41](#)—one infused with our existing characterizations of Jesus—is that he was moved with compassion or "great pity." But the Greek word means simply "great emotion"; the specific emotion is not given. Given the context, the alternate reading makes sense: Jesus was overcome by *anger*.

Jesus? Angry? I believe so.

He is angry to be distracted or interrupted in his work—he was there not to heal but to preach! Now he is *doubly* disabled from carrying out that task. He orders the man not to say a word, perhaps hoping that once his ritual purification is accomplished he can return to his plans.

I once heard "parenting" defined as "a parable of interruption." So is ministry. When the pristine cloister of my study is invaded, I often get angry. And every time I do, I remember that Jesus too experienced interruption in his ministry. Churches do too.