

February 12, 2006

Epiphany

"Jesus Makes Us Clean"

MARK 1:40-45

A man with leprosy[a] came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." ⁴¹Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" ⁴²Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. ⁴³Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: ⁴⁴"See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." ⁴⁵Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

I am holding in my hand some rubber gloves. They are useful if you are working on your car and changing the oil. They keep your hands from getting full of dirty oil. Another set of gloves such as these can be used when working with harsh chemicals. They keep your hands from being burned. A dentist or doctor will wear gloves when they are working with their patients to prevent the spread of germs.

Our Lord Jesus was not wearing gloves when he reached out his hand and touched the man who had leprosy. The crowd must have gasped in horror. What is Jesus doing? He is touching a man who has leprosy. In Jesus you have someone who genuinely cares about you. He is not afraid to reach out his hand and help you when you come to him.

One of the most popular movies of all time is *E.T.* An extra terrestrial, a strange looking creature comes to this earth and interacts with a dysfunctional California family. What a dramatic moment it was when ET reached out his hand, extended his finger, and brought a dead flower back to life again. There was hope that this compassionate and loving creature from another world had the power to help human beings with their problems in life.

No one cares about you more than Jesus. No one has more power to help you than Jesus. He is sitting at the right hand of God in a position of tremendous power and strength to help anyone who calls on him for help. As we are told in Romans 10, "Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Let's take a closer look at this miracle of Jesus healing a leper as we see that **"Jesus Makes Us Clean."**

1) Healing for sickness

In Jesus we have someone who can heal sickness. We can still go to him today and seek his power and help through prayer. We are told, "A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'" At the time of Jesus leprosy may have been a general term for a variety of different skin diseases. Today we are familiar with a form of leprosy called Hansen's disease that affects the skin, causes large welts and nodules and even enters the nerves of the body so people feel no

pain. That is different from some of the leprosy mentioned in the Bible that turned the skin of people sickly white. What made leprosy especially bad were Old Testament laws that required someone with skin diseases to stay away from other people. If someone approached they had to cry out, "Unclean, Unclean." Lepers were like the flashing lights and the screaming siren of an emergency vehicle. They told people in an unforgettable way that a holy and perfect God needs things to be clean. Jewish rabbis added more to the laws of God. They said that if a leper passed under the same tree under which you were standing, that also made you unclean. Lepers were forced to live together as outcasts of society, away from family and friends.

The leprous man came to Jesus and fell on his knees. People still do that when they stand before a king or queen or even important official. This leper kneels before Jesus as his superior, his Lord and God who can help him. Some day the whole world will kneel before him and proclaim him Lord and God. "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

What a beautiful prayer comes from his leprosy lips! "If you are willing, you can make me clean." "If you are willing..." That's the way we pray our prayers. We pray as Jesus prayed to his Father in the Garden, "Not my will but yours be done." The Lord can answer prayer by providing an immediate relief from an illness. He can answer our prayers by giving us strength to endure the pain or suffering. He can heal us by turning the problem into a blessing for people in ways that will only be clear to us someday in heaven. He can also do the ultimate healing, take us home to be with him as he did this past week with our beloved brother in the Lord, Wilbur Bingham.

What does Jesus do with people who come to him for help? "Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man." Jesus had compassion. One day he saw a crowd of people coming to him. It says that he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. The word for compassion has in it the thought of being deeply moved in the pit of the stomach. As Valentines Day approaches we speak about feelings coming from the heart. Ask any teenage boy who is love sick for a girl where it hurts inside, or any soldier who is home sick for their family, or any person who has lost a loved one. It is not in the heart. It is deep in the pit of the stomach. That is how Jesus feels towards people, and even still does for people today as he sits at God's right hand. The book of Hebrews tells us, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in all parts as we are, yet without sin."

Jesus touched him. Jesus touched the man whose body was covered with leprosy. Jesus touched the eyes of the blind man, he made mud, put it on his eyes, touched him and healed him. He touched the ears of the deaf man so he could hear. He gladly welcomed parents with little children so he could take them in his arms, touch them and bless them. See Jesus reach out his arm, reach out his finger, touch the man. Listen to him speak the powerful words, "Be clean!"

It says, "Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured." Did you catch what our Old Testament reading said about Naaman's leprosy? "His flesh was restored and it became clean like that of a young boy." It was an immediate cure. It is hard to look up leprosy on the Internet and see the pictures of people with Hansen's disease. If that is what this

man looked like, the ugly disfigured face was instantly cured. He didn't need a mirror to see what his face looked like. People didn't turn the faces away when he approached them. He could feel his skin. He could look at his hands and arms. It was gone. Not a spot remained. When Jesus performs a miracle, he takes your breath away. It happens so fast and it is so perfect.

Every since Adam fell into sin, the world in which we live will be marred by people with a variety of different diseases, such as leprosy, or cancer, or heart disease, diabetes, and the list goes on and on. We rejoice to hear the news this past week that the number of cancer deaths has gone down this past year in our country. We are thankful for modern medicine that puts new arteries and valves into hearts, and cures infections. Our congregation has been blessed with a prayer chain. We hear about people who are ill and we band together and pray for them. We trust the words of Hebrews 4 that invite us, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of needs." "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear." Always we pray as the man did with Jesus, "If you are willing!" Not my will but yours be done.

2) Healing for sin

Why would Jesus tell this man not tell anyone what had happened? Did that strike you as strange? "Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning, 'See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing as a testimony to them.'" The word for strong warning is actually used in the Greek for the snorting of a horse. Have you ever heard a horse snort? They do this when they are excited or agitated or even angry. Jesus does not want this man running around telling everyone what happened, because the crowds of people will start coming to him for the wrong reason. He wants to preach about the kingdom of God, the good news of salvation. John the Baptist introduced Jesus with the words, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." If the man tells everyone what Jesus did, it will be impossible for Jesus to preach and teach the truth about himself as the Savior of all people.

Can't you almost hear the crowd shouting, "Miracle, miracle, we want another miracle! That's what people still want today. They see the Christian church as political force to change the world, or as world-wide program to make people feel better about themselves, or as a religion that teaches people how to be good. What is easily missed and overlooked is the greatest need, the cleansing of our sin through the blood of Jesus.

Jesus told the man to show himself to the priest. The priest could pronounce him clean and offer a sacrifice in the temple according to the law of Moses. This whole act would serve as witness to the religious leaders in Jerusalem to help them see what Jesus had done. That was the orderly way Jesus wanted the miracle reported. Jesus wanted the good news about the miracle making a big splash in Jerusalem, not in Galilee where people would be carried away with religious fervor for the wrong reasons.

When we think about leprosy this morning, and other diseases, it is hard not think of the worst disease that lives in all of us, the disease of sin. Adam passed down his sin to us and that makes us dying people. That sin also corrupts us and leads us to live lives that

are unacceptable to a holy and perfect God. The graphic depiction of Israel's sin found in Isaiah 1 can be applied to all people including each of us. "From the sole of your foot, to the top of your head, there is no soundness, only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil." Jesus had compassion on us. He did more than soothe our wounds or put us into an inn as the Good Samaritan once did with the man who was beaten, robbed and left for dead. Jesus took our wounds and welts upon himself, all of them. When he rose from the dead, the Father pronounced him clean, and in that powerful proclamation of clean we have the hope of our cleansing. We don't have to keep the message to ourselves. Our bulletin cover tells us to rejoice and be glad. Our lives become a song of praise for the miracle of cleansing Jesus has done for us. As the spiritual song says,

*Shackled by a heavy burden, 'neath a load of guilt and shame;
Then the hand of Jesus touched me, And now I am no longer the same.*

*He touched me, O, He touched me, And O, the joy that floods my soul.
Something happened, and now I know, He touched me and made me whole.*