

February 12, 2012

Epiphany 6

*"The Joy of Being Clean through Jesus"*

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### **MARK 1:40-45**

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**A** man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."<sup>41</sup> Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!"<sup>42</sup> Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.<sup>43</sup> Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning:<sup>44</sup> "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."<sup>45</sup> Instead 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.

If you drive home after worship on Clark Avenue you may notice people standing on the street corners holding signs. They will wave the signs back and forth to get your attention. Some of the signs direct you to new homes that are for sale, others to special deals on pizza or other food and others offer help with your taxes.

At the time of Jesus the people who had leprosy were like living human signs proclaiming a message of being unclean. If someone approached them they had to shout out, "Unclean! Unclean! Stay away I am unclean!" If you had leprosy or even other skin diseases you had to stay away from the rest of the community and live in leper colonies until you were clean. If your leprosy went away, you had to show yourself to the priest to be pronounced clean before you went back into the community.

Imagine the joy of the leper who was healed by Jesus. After the priest pronounced him clean he went around telling people freely and openly what Jesus had done for him, even though Jesus had told him not to say anything about it. He proudly showed people how clean his skin was because Jesus had healed him.

This morning we are gathered together in this worship service to celebrate how clean we are through Jesus. Every sin that makes us unclean and unacceptable to our God has been completely forgiven and paid for through Jesus. That is the greatest blessing we enjoy in life as we say in Psalm 103, "Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits- who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases." With David we pray, "Wash me and I will be whiter than snow."

### **The misery of leprosy and sin**

Leprosy at the time of Jesus was so bad because it required that people be separated from the family and friends that dearly loved them. "A man with leprosy came to him and begged on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'" This man had a miserable life because of his skin condition. The book of Luke tells us that he was "full of leprosy."

If you use your computer to look up more information about leprosy you will read about a form of leprosy called Hansen's Disease. This is actually a disease of the nervous system that keeps you from feeling pain. Without pain, you don't feel blisters forming on your feet, or slivers in your skin, or burns, or bumps and bruises. Imagine sanding a piece of your skin or hand with sand paper and not even feeling the pain.

The worst part of being a leper was the social stigma attached to it. Old Testament law required that people with skin diseases such as leprosy live outside the camp, away from other people. Here is what it says in Leviticus 13, "The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean! As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp.'" What made this even worse were the extra laws Jewish rabbis added to the laws of God. The rabbis said you were unclean even if you stood under the same tree where a leper had once stood. They also falsely called leprosy "the finger of God" because they believed God was punishing people for some terrible sin in their past by afflicting them with leprosy.

This man who was full of leprosy came to Jesus believing that Jesus could heal him. Notice his faith and trust in Jesus. He falls to his knees and begs Jesus with the words, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." He knows Jesus has the power to heal him, but he leaves this in the hands of Jesus to decide if it is really going to happen. When we go to the Lord in prayer for healing for our sicknesses we pray "not my will, but yours be done."

Jesus was filled with compassion for this poor man with his torn clothes and disheveled hair and sores all over his body. "Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man." Compassion is what you feel in your stomach when something you see an animal you love suffering in pain and agony. Compassion is what you feel in your stomach when you visit someone you love in the hospital and see them in pain and suffering. Jesus had compassion on this man. The book of Hebrews tells us this about our loving Savior. "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." As we sing in the hymn, "Jesus knows our every weakness, take it to the Lord in prayer."

Think of a time when you saw someone suffering and had compassion for them. The man was ahead of me in line to pick up a prescription at Walmart. He was not standing. He was sitting in a motorized cart that some of the customers use who cannot walk very well. His hair was disheveled. He hadn't shaved for several days. He was way over weight and he looked sick. He was holding some cash in his hand to pay for the co-pay amount, but it was not enough. I offered to pay it for him, but he refused with a smile and said he would pick it up later. Where do these sicknesses come from that deeply move us inside? They come from our first parents, Adam and Eve, who introduced sickness and death into the world. God is not fingering out certain people for afflictions because of some sin in their past life. This is not what some call "bad karma." All of us will undergo a certain amount of pain and suffering because we are dying people.

Leprosy was more than a disease in the Old Testament. The Lord used it like big sign held up on the corner to remind people of the greater disease of sin that make us unclean in the presence of the Lord. Sin is something that is systemic. It is in our system. Jesus said,

"For out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimonies, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean.'" With sin we cannot just treat the symptoms. If I just do a little good on the outside I will be OK and right with God on the inside. Sin is a retrovirus, lying dormant, under the surface, ready to break out at anytime into full blown. That sin of anger that you struggle with lies dormant for a while and then it explodes in evil thoughts and even evil actions as you lash out at someone who has hurt you. Jeremiah 17 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

Well, enough of leprosy and the sin that it pictures. Jesus has compassion on this man and heals him completely. He does the same for us.

### **Jesus heals completely**

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. Under Old Testament law such touching of the leper would also make you unclean as well. But this is Jesus, Lord and God. He says as he touches him, "Be clean" and immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. The Savior's finger touches a man whose body is clean and free from every trace of leprosy. This is the voice of God himself who spoke at creation, "Let there be light" and instantly there was light. This same voice of God speaks to this man "Be clean" and immediately he is clean, spotless and free from any disease.

The miracles of Jesus always have the element of the spectacular to them. Jesus tells a lame man to take up his mat and go home, and immediately the man jumps up, walks and goes home. Jesus opens the ears of a man who never heard a sound in his life and he not only hears and understands words, but is able to speak them plainly. Over 5000 people are fed with only five loaves of bread and two small fish, and there are twelve baskets of leftovers.

You are attached to these miracles that Jesus did for you. In John 15 Jesus says that he is the vine and we are the branches. Then he says in verse 3, "you are clean through the Word I have spoken to you." When Jesus died on the cross he cried out "It is finished." His words made the announcement that every sin ever committed was paid for in full at the cross. The first chapter of Isaiah shows us the ugliness of sin that infects us all, but at the end of the chapter there is a gracious invitation to come to the Lord and find in him complete cleansing and pardon. "Your whole head is injured, your whole heart is afflicted. From the sole of your feet 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." Now listen to the gracious invitation that gives us the hope of being clean: "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

Can't you see that leper looking at his new skin and jumping up and down for joy and profusely thanking Jesus? Jesus gives him 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 man did not listen to Jesus. He talked freely to people and shared the good news with them. He told everyone how Jesus made him completely clean. Can't you see him rolling up his sleeves and showing

off his arms and describing in vivid detailed how they were once full of leprosy but now they are totally clean? This man must have told a huge number of people what had happened because people started coming to Jesus in even larger numbers. It says that Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but had to stay outside in lonely places.

Here we are gathered together in this place and we have the privilege of reminding each other week after week how Jesus has made us clean. All the ugliness and shamefulness of our past sin was placed on Jesus. I can take micro-fiber cloth such as this to wipe the water spots off the car after it has been washed, but some will always be left behind. Jesus performed a miracle by taking everything we have done wrong, everything, and paid for it and removed it completely. Jesus asks us to take this joy home with us and not keep it to ourselves, but share it with as many people as possible. As we sang joyfully to each other in the words of the hymn "Washed in his blood most precious till not spot remains." Amen.