

## **“Facing Our Own Leprosy”**

Dear friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

As you know, there has been a fair amount of talk these past few weeks over the recent measles-outbreak. Where it started, how it's progressed, and where it will end up are all matters of conversation, if not concern. And it's interesting, as with so many of the issues that tend to surface these days, how the outbreak of measles itself doesn't even come close to the outbreak of the ensuing debate.

You've heard the conversation. It's on radio and television. Social media has jumped in. There are even websites that have emerged, adding to the amount of information, if not the underlying concern.

Much of it centers (as you know) on the question of vaccinations; whether they should be mandatory requirements, ensuring the safety of the general public, or whether parents should be allowed to make those decisions themselves, ensuring that the responsibility for our children remains in its rightful place.

Now, it's not my intent here today to try to sort this all out. It'll be interesting to watch and to see what happens. I don't want (in this sermon) to add to the debate. What is my intent and what I do want (in this sermon) is to take on what's in front of us and to sort out what it all means.

If we were to give names to each Sunday in the Church Year based upon the Scripture readings for the day, today might well be called Leprosy Sunday. The Old Testament lesson and the Gospel both deal with the curing of a person afflicted with that awful disease. The one goes way back to the days of Elisha (the prophet), more than eight centuries before Jesus. The other comes from the ministry of Christ himself.

I don't how much you know about leprosy. It was a dreadful illness. It had extreme effects. A person with leprosy would watch as his or her body would begin to deteriorate and eventually decay, gradually losing not only the use of their limbs, but (often times) the limbs themselves – fingers, toes, and so on. It was gruesome.

I remember, years ago, early in my ministry, we had invited a young lay missionary from Thailand to give a presentation (during the Sunday school hour) on the work he was doing with lepers. He showed a self-made movie, (one he had put together), filled with realistic scenes of what it was like. In the background, he had a recording of the St. Olaf College Choir singing “Beautiful Savior.” I remember how (more than a dozen) of the children (who were there) couldn't watch and had to walk out. Perhaps it shouldn't have been shown to them. Leprosy in its worse stages is no fun.

Not only that, but the disease had some definite social implications as well. The moment it was detected, that individual, even though it may not have been a serious case, became an instant outcast. Normal relationships were no longer possible. The fear of its contagion led to a long list of rules to be followed; about never coming within so many yards of a healthy person, of yelling “Unclean, unclean” whenever others were in the vicinity, and on it went. (You get the picture.) It was a pathetic life, to say the least.

The stories we find in the Bible of people with leprosy need to be seen (and understood) in that context. The story of the ten lepers who were healed and only one came back to give thanks. The story in today's text, also found (in Matthew and Luke), it's the same thing.

The man in today's story came to Jesus with a simple request. It was really a prayer of humility and faith. It doesn't say whether the man's leprosy was well-advanced or not. It doesn't matter. What matters is that he came to Jesus, knelt down at his feet, and he begged him, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” If you will, you can make it happen.

And so, what happens? Mark says that Jesus “filled with compassion,” reached out his hand and touched the man (and said) “I am willing. Be clean.” Immediately (Mark tells us) the leprosy left him and he was cured.

Now, let's stop there for a moment. We could take this text and do a number of things that would all be legitimate. We could moralize what it says and ask ourselves if we are willing and ready to do the same? If Jesus is our example (which he is) are we doing for those who are hurting (around us) what he would want us to do? Are we moved with pity for those who suffer in what is (without question) a highly imperfect world? Or do we shelter ourselves? Do we do whatever we can to keep it all at arms-length or even greater?

It wasn't so easy in Jesus' day to be separated from the suffering. It was a more daily (and natural) part of life. Today we have institutions and agencies and convalescent homes and hospitals. Thank God for them. They're a gift. The people in those places are doing a good and a great work. But those places also (indirectly) serve to isolate (the rest of us) from a firsthand contact with the kind of suffering we cannot ignore, nor should we.

The simple fact that grandpas and grandmas (most often) no longer live in the same home with their extended family ends up with the same result. (I won't attempt to judge whether it's good or bad.) But it does mean that (again) we live day by day in a world that is isolated, if not insulated and almost (in some ways) unreal.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we should return to the days when hospitals and care for the sick and the elderly were at a more primitive stage. That's not what we're saying. (Don't misunderstand.) But we need to guard ourselves from what can easily become a too-convenient isolation from it all, particularly in those cases when we don't want to face what needs to be faced.

Suffering in this world is a very personal thing. We all know that, (maybe as personal as it gets), but it needs to be shared, especially among Christians. One of the most difficult things (in life) is to suffer alone. Suffering and sickness need a personal touch and Jesus knew it.

Now, whether we can (as Jesus did) in our text, effect a cure by the touch of our hand is not the point. The point is it doesn't matter. We can still be of help. We need to help. In fact, it may sound trite, but we can (and we should) whenever we have the chance, enter into the suffering of others. There is within the Christian family what has sometimes been called "the fellowship of suffering." It's one we cannot avoid. It's our calling.

Now, that's one way to come at our text; to moralize it, to take what happened and to apply it. Jesus cared for those who were suffering. He reached out and offered his hand. So should we. It's a legitimate move to make. It's consistent with Jesus' life. But let's take this text (now) in a different direction and see this same story (for a few moments) in a different light.

You and I may not be able to identify with the leper's physical suffering. Some of us can. Most of us cannot. But we all need to identify with the leper. Our sickness may not be the same. It may not at the moment even be physical. But we are all infirm and we are all in need of the master's hand. Whatever else, we all have this in common, that we are all afflicted with what the hymn writer calls "the leprosy of sin." We may or may not be called on to do a lot of suffering, but we are in need of healing.

This past week I was with some of the teachers in our school, doing a little sharing around the Bible. I told them, (a few days earlier), I was in the car, listening to one of the more liberal radio stations, and I was struck by what I heard. It was a take-off on a story from the world of sports and they were discussing the particulars. The person leading the conversation made the comment that there is a moral vacuum in our country, that we have lost (he said), as a nation, our moral compass. What struck me was not so much what he said, but that what he said was said on one of the more liberal stations. I couldn't believe what I heard...but I believe he was right.

One of the clear signs of our spiritual need is the fact that (as a nation) we don't think we have one. It's beyond us. We're above it. Give us enough time and we'll figure it out. What we don't even see is what we need. What we need is the Master to reach out his hand and touch us. "I will; be clean." That's what we need, but we don't see it.

Even in the church, there's a tendency to lose sight of why we're here. We'd know it if a leper walked in and cried out. "O, Lord, why this? Heal. Cleanse." (We'd all see it.) The greater sickness we sometimes ignore, or pretend it isn't real.

It is real. There's a disease we all have; it's called sin. There's an illness that needs a cure; and there is one. His name is Jesus.

Jesus wasn't supposed to touch that leper. But he did it anyway. He didn't mind getting dirty. He wasn't afraid. In the same way, he wasn't afraid to touch our sin. The Bible says "he became sin for us," he suffered for us, suffered for you.

Let's put ourselves in the shoes of that leper. An outcast to society, not able to come within a certain distance of anyone else? Do you know what? That's what sin does. (It's the same thing.) It separates us from God. It separates you from God. You're an outcast, without Jesus. You can't even come close to the Father without Christ. But he's dealt with it. He deals with it. He's reached out his hand and you are clean.

In the story, Jesus told the man not to tell anyone about his healing. (That's interesting, but understandable.) It was early in his ministry. He was concerned that people would come to him with the wrong motives. Jesus wasn't into sensationalism, attracting large crowds because of what he did. What he did would eventually attract and it did. But it's not where he wanted to start. Even in the wilderness, when tempted by Satan (to turn the stones into bread), Jesus fought the urge to use his powers like magic. It's not what he came to do. What he came to do was to heal and to forgive, and what he came to do, he did for us.

There's a bit of irony in this text when it comes to the man who was healed. Jesus told him to keep quiet, to not say a word. Mark tells us that "he went out and began to talk freely (and openly), spreading the news." What's ironic is that this man was told not to, and he did. We are told to do it, and so often we don't.

My friends, today's story is simple, as are the lessons. Jesus has dealt with our leprosy. Whatever form it has taken in our lives, however we have become spiritually dismembered, Jesus dealt with it. He took it to the cross. He paid the price. He took in his body the only vaccination that can cure, and we are healed.

Let me close today with this. This coming Wednesday is the beginning of Lent. Lent is a time in the Church year when we focus more than ever on what Jesus did on the cross and why it had to happen. For the next forty days, we'll be walking with Jesus, confessing our sin, listening to his Word, allowing his Spirit to speak into our lives.

Perhaps the message today has felt a bit harsh. Maybe it's seemed more direct than it needs to be. (I'll let you make that call.) I wouldn't want to say. What I will say is that if it's felt a bit harsh and direct, don't miss the point. We're all lepers, outcast from our Father. Not a chance in the world to be in the kingdom. Not even a hope.

The good news is that we have hope. We are in the kingdom. We are no longer set apart. Our leprosy is gone, and it's gone because of Christ. And so, come, confess your sin. Recognize your need. Know that in Jesus you are clean. Let's pray.

Gracious God, we thank you for your healing touch, for the assurance that in Jesus our sin is washed away and we are made right with you. Help us to never lose sight of our need, of what you have done for us in your Son. Give us hearts of compassion for those who suffer, give us a clear sense of how we are to live. And, above all, open our mouths to speak your name and to not be afraid to tell others what you have done...in Jesus' name. Amen.