

Jesus Talks To A Leper • Matthew 8:1-4

During the week between Christmas and New Year our family vacationed on the East Coast of South Florida and then on New Year's Day began a drive northward, taking a rather roundabout route through Alabama and Mississippi and Louisiana and then on northward. Along the way I purchased a local newspaper and came across a feature story I did not expect. It told about a leprosarium in the state of Louisiana -- the only one in existence in the contiguous 48 United States. It was a leprosarium where a century ago people were brought because they were diagnosed with the disease of leprosy. From distant places like New York or San Francisco many were whisked away in the middle night and dropped off in that out-of-the-way part of Louisiana during the wee hours of the morning. Many never saw their family, friends or home again. They eventually died and were buried in the cemetery of the leprosarium.

Leprosy, as you may know, is a terrible disease. It causes a thickening of the skin in the hands, feet and other parts of the body. It causes skin lesions and does a lot of nerve damage. Often the hands and the feet are curled up, claw-like, so they cannot be used. Because they lose their sense of feel, accidents frequently occur where hands, feet and limbs are lost sometimes by fire or by other means. The body is often disfigured after years of leprosy — sometimes terribly and hideously so. It is a disease which progresses slowly and tragically.

A lot has changed since that leprosarium was founded in Louisiana. Actually the disease isn't called leprosy anymore, it's called Hansen's disease, named after a physician in Norway who in 1874 discovered the bacteria which causes the disease. Today there are drugs for the treatment of Hansen's disease and people are no longer isolated but are typically treated as outpatients near their homes wherever that may be. Today in the United States it's estimated that the total number of people who suffer from leprosy or Hansen's disease is somewhere short of 2,000.

The newspaper feature concluded with the story of a man about 30 years old currently living in southern California. He was recently diagnosed as having Hansen's disease. He studied up on the disease and was convinced that it wasn't dangerously con-

tagious, that it could be contained and his life could be lived pretty much as normal. Shortly thereafter at a party one night in Los Angeles, with a group of friends, he casually mentioned that he was receiving treatment for leprosy. He told the newspaper reporter that he regrets ever telling his friends, for as soon as they found out, they started to distance themselves from him. Now his friends will no longer have anything to do with him.

If you read through the Bible, you'll find between the first and the last books of the Bible many mentions of leprosy. Actually, the leprosy of the Bible was not always Hansen's disease but any one of a large number of skin ailments, all collectively referred to as leprosy. But whatever the name, leprosy was greatly feared and those infected with it were often isolated.

Let me take you to the day that Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount — the most famous and scintillating sermon ever preached. Matthew 8:1-4 tells us what happened afterwards.

When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

I read this story and find it sad that the man's name is not even mentioned. I suppose it would be rather typical of the way lepers were treated in those times. He was known merely by his disease. In most cases that was all people

wanted to know about him. But I suppose we do pretty much the same thing today, don't we? We tend to label people by their problems or their peculiarities or their profession. We might forget a name but say, "Oh I know who you're talking about, he's the drunk, or she's the divorcee." Actually we have some pretty ugly names to categorize people by because of their particular problems or peculiarities.

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In the first century, lepers received very particular treatment in Palestine. The law required that once a person was diagnosed with leprosy, that he or she could no longer have any association with otherwise healthy persons. They had to wear torn clothing and disheveled and unkempt hair whenever they would go out in public. Lepers were required to put their hand over their upper lip and shout out for everyone to hear, "Unclean! Unclean!" They always had to identify themselves as a leper. On a calm day the law required that no one could come within 6 feet of anyone who had leprosy. On a windy day no one could come closer than 150 feet to someone who was suffering with the disease of leprosy.

Josephus, a Jewish Historian of the first century, says that persons with leprosy were treated as if they were, in effect, dead men. Ancient literature has some particularly interesting and painful things to say about the relationship between rabbis and persons with leprosy. One is the account of a rabbi who refused to eat an egg which had been purchased at a market on a street where a leper once had walked. Another rabbi boasted that he always carried stones to throw to make sure that lepers would keep a suitable and legal safe distance. You get the picture? Lepers were despised. They were avoided. They were ostracized. They were considered disgusting.

Knowing all that, can you imagine the response of a first century Jew hearing or reading the story of a rabbi named Jesus who reached out his hand and touched a leper? They must have been stunned.

First, consider the options of this man. The record simply says that a man with leprosy came. That's simple enough, but do you realize what that meant? For him to come into a crowd, aside from breaking the law and hearing the insults, he risked his life that they would pick up stones and kill him. I'm impressed by this unnamed man with this terrible disease. Impressed that he was proactive rather than reactive. Impressed that he chose to believe rather than to blame. I'm impressed that instead of complaining about his malady, he came to Jesus for help.

Throughout the centuries people have always faced great difficulties. But I think if we were to put together a panel of people from every century or from every part of the globe, that they would point an accusing finger at us today because we spend so much of our energy and resources blaming others for our problems. As a generation we blame our parents or blame our schools or government or church or a spouse or children for all our

problems. Perhaps we should tear a page out of the biography of the unnamed man with leprosy. He did not blame others, although certainly he must have gotten the disease from somebody. He did not complain, although unquestionably his sickness was serious. But he did something. He came to Jesus. He came and he worshipped.

Actually the Bible says that a man with leprosy came and knelt before Jesus, but the Greek word "knelt" is almost always translated elsewhere in the Bible and in other ancient literature as "worshipped." It was a risky thing to do, for to worship someone was to acknowledge that person to be God. He could be accused of blasphemy. And he would put Jesus at risk as well, for already there were those who severely criticized Jesus for allegations that they thought he made concerning his own deity -- that he was, in fact, God. But this man, this unnamed man with leprosy, didn't seem to care. He saw that Jesus was worthy of worship and so he just did it, pushing all the risks aside.

Now I find a lesson in him for us. When we find ourselves dealing with life's leprosy, we too should come to Jesus. Let us not be so consumed with our problems that we fail to first see who He is and to worship Him as the Son of God and Lord of all. We need to do what the leper did, understanding that worshipping always precedes asking.

The man with leprosy spoke, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." He had absolute faith in the ability of Jesus to cure him — to do what no priest or physician could do. His words did not demand healing. You might even technically argue that he didn't ask for healing. He simply declared his faith that Jesus could do it if he'd choose to do it.

Can I be rather personal with you? I have often wondered how I would respond if I had a diagnosis of some terrible, perhaps terminal, disease. I've seen a lot of people in my life and a lot of different maladies, but I've learned that there is a great deal of difference between knowing someone with cancer and having cancer yourself. Knowing someone who has AIDS is certainly not the same thing as having AIDS. There are miles of difference between visiting someone who has a debilitating disease and being that person.

I know there is probably no way of guessing how I might respond or react when my turn comes, but I can tell you, from today's perspective at least, I would like to be like this man whose story is told in Matthew, chapter 8. I expect that I would want to be healed as much as he wanted to be healed. If

need be, I would push my way through crowds regardless of what people might think. While I know I must be responsible to seek appropriate medical treatment, I would like to think that I would come to Jesus believing with all of my heart that ultimately he can do that which no physician could ever do. I want to have absolute confidence and faith that he can heal me. But I would also like to think that I would trust Jesus enough to leave it to him. If he chooses, he can make me well.

What Jesus did next is pretty extraordinary -- he was the Christ that cured. He touched the leper. Jesus reached out his hand and touched him. He touched the untouchable. He put himself at risk. He broke the rules — all because he cared. The crowd must have gasped at what he did. I suspect that there were people who had listened to Jesus on the mountain top and were enthralled by him, who, when they saw him touch that man with leprosy, turned around and walked away because they were never going to follow a man who would do such a despicable thing. There were others, I imagine, that kicked around with their feet trying to find rocks on the ground that they might throw to stone the leper or perhaps to stone the teacher, the rabbi who touched him.

There is something very special about a touch. Especially when you're alone, or when you're scared, when you've got to deal with what you've got to deal with all by yourself. We live at a time when touching may be socially uncomfortable. For some of us, I suppose, we avoid touching others because we're afraid it's going to be misunderstood as having a sexual implication and subsequent liability, while others are always touching so that it no longer has any meaning. Well, Jesus wasn't afraid of the risks. The man with leprosy knew that it had meaning. It meant everything to that desperate man when Jesus touched him, because it meant that Jesus cared more about him than what the people thought. Jesus cared more about him than the rules, regulations and laws that kept everyone else away. Jesus saw him and touched him as a man who really mattered.

Most of us will probably never see a case of leprosy — even those of you who are involved with medicine for your careers. But society is loaded with untouchables -- all have different names. All the people that the crowd splits for, all the people that have labels instead of their names, all the people

that appear to be dangerous and uncomfortable. Some studies have shown as a person with a terminal illness comes closer and closer to death, that physicians, sometimes families, friends, come to visit far less often -- in order to keep our distance from the dying.

But let me tell you that there is a special comfort for those of you who have been abandoned by others, from whom society has kept a distance. Maybe it's because of cancer, or AIDS, because of the color of your skin, or the number of your years, or how much money you have or how much money you don't have. It might be because of some crime you committed or sin of which you are guilty or maybe because of bankruptcy, addiction — whatever has labeled you. Hear the good news! While the crowds may keep their distance, while your friends may forsake you, while your family may be ashamed of you, and while even the church may treat you like a leper, Jesus will reach out and touch you. He is not embarrassed by us nor is he ashamed. He is not turned off by the labels that have replaced our names. He cares. He accepts us as the persons that we are. He reaches out and touches us. To his

touch, he added these tender words for that man to hear. He said, "I'm willing." He was saying that he was willing to use his power to meet that man's needs.

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I suspect that the man with leprosy must have almost burst with excitement! He already believed and was convinced that Jesus could heal him, but now he knew Jesus would do it and he could hardly wait for Jesus to speak again. And when Jesus spoke again, he just said, "Be clean!"

The story says the man was immediately cured of his leprosy. How do you suppose such a thing works? If we were to step back and try to analyze this from a scientific perspective, how would we explain it? Was it some sort of psychosomatic malady that affected his skin because of some psychological or emotional distress? Was he so convinced that Jesus could cure him that when Jesus spoke there was a psychological conversion that affected his body and thus it appeared as if a man who had leprosy was in fact cured? Or, do you think that he really didn't have the disease in the first place? Were all these folk who had been listening

up on the mountain so mesmerized by Jesus that they believed something happened which in reality did not? What do you think really happened?

Let us not forget that we aren't talking about some ordinary man. We speak here of the Son of God, the Lord of All. It was he that created the universe by speaking a word, so it's true that his word does things that our word does not do. I believe that a true miracle took place. Because it was a miracle, it's beyond our explanation. But we must admit that because something is not within our explanation, it's not therefore untrue.

However, it raises all kinds of questions for us today. Can such miracles happen now? Is he still the Christ with the cure? The answer is a resounding, "Yes!" Then that brings up another question, why don't I see the kind of miracles today that happened then? I suppose the answers may be several. Perhaps it's because we don't come as that leper came. Or perhaps it's because we do not worship as that leper worshipped. Or perhaps it's because we do not believe as that leper believed. Or perhaps it's because Jesus does not always choose, as he did that day.

The truth of it is, that we cannot control the choices of Jesus. But we can accept them as wise and good and we can come and worship and we can believe.

So let me say it straight out -- take your diseases and take your difficulties to Jesus Christ. Worship him, believe him, tell him your needs and tell him that you trust him to do what is right. When you do, you will be amazed to feel his touch, to see his miracles.

Jesus did not cure and run. He gave follow-up directions. He said, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." It's kind of surprising that Jesus told the man to be quiet, because I'm sure he wanted to tell everyone that he possibly could. But understand that Jesus was on a far greater mission than curing someone of a terrible disease. He was on his way to the cross and to the appointed time to cure all of human kind of the far greater eternal disease, sin. He did not want that progression or timetable to be interrupted by a sudden popularity that would arouse the suspicion of the Roman authorities.

Jesus asked the man to be quiet and follow the prescribed Hebrew law of the book of Leviticus — to go and to be examined by a priest, multiple examinations actually, to offer sacrifices and to go

through a whole course of events so that it could be clearly documented that a miracle had taken place. But beyond that, Jesus wanted to connect the man to the spiritual community that could meet his continuing needs. Jesus knew what we can discover today, as well. There are often people who experience miracles in their lives but thereafter still choose to remain isolated and do not follow his instructions to connect to the scriptures and the church.

In closing, I would invite you to an exercise in imagination. Imagine with me that we were to cast this as a play, and that you were to be part of the cast. What part would you play? Do you think you'd be part of the crowd coming down from the mountain, watching everything that was happening? Or do you think that you might play the part of the leper? Are you an observer to others' needs or are you someone who has a great need where Jesus can make a difference?

For those who would choose to play the part of the one with leprosy, let me try your imagination one more time. Suppose we were to update the script and cast it in contemporary times, so that the difficulty would not be leprosy, but whatever your difficulty might be -- your disease, your needs. What would that be?

You see the picture. You get the point. Come to Jesus with whatever is the greatest need in your life. Kneel down before him and worship him. Tell him that you fully believe that he can do whatever needs to be done in your life and that you fully trust him to do what is best.

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