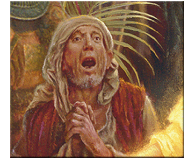


Mark 1:40-45 3/8/09 (Triumphant Entry #4) **THE HEALED LEPER**

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This account of the man with leprosy happens early on in Jesus' public ministry, not long after He calls His first disciples. It's just kind of tucked into the Gospel writer's accounts (Matthew and Luke also mention it) between some other healings done by Jesus and the story of the paralytic man. Remember that one? Jesus was teaching in a house that was so crowded no one could get into it, so this guy's buddies tore a hole in the roof and lowered him into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. And I'd say that story probably overshadows this one in any Sunday School curriculum or in any general reading of the Bible. It's just more flashy and noticeable. This story is neither. It just kind of happens as Jesus is traveling. Some leper comes up, falls on his knees, asks Jesus to heal him, Jesus does and then moves on. It's almost like Simon says about some of the American Idol performances, "Forgettable."

But I submit to you that it certainly wasn't forgettable to that leper. And it shouldn't be to us either, because there are some incredibly powerful things going on in this "simple" healing. And I want to develop some of them for you this morning.

First of all, leprosy is one of those things that we hear about, but it doesn't tend to be very real to most of us because we just don't see it. Nevertheless, there are still some 2-5 million people with leprosy worldwide. For some 2,500 years, history recorded leprosy as an incurable disease, but recent multi-drug therapy has been able to finally provide a cure. In fact, the drug company Novartis, has been giving the drugs away free to all patients worldwide, so there is hope that we will see this disease eradicated in our lifetimes. But in Biblical times, it was a horrible disease, attacking the nerves of the skin, fingers and toes and face. Because lepers lose their sense of feeling, they often injure themselves, and without realizing it they develop infections as a result. Some end up losing fingers and toes, some develop lesions and boils on their skin. Some lose their sight.

Slide: Leper pics

Again, since there was no cure in Biblical times, the only way communities knew how to handle the disease and to keep it from spreading was to isolate those who were infected. In fact, that's how God told the Israelites to handle it in the Old Testament.

Slide: "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." (Leviticus 13:45-46 NIV)

Folks, can you imagine living that way? As someone who was "unclean"? Not just sick, but "unclean"? In fact, the Bible also said that if a person even touched an "unclean" person he would be temporarily unclean himself. So it was just natural for a leper in those days to become more and more isolated as, first his friends and then his family, became less and less willing to touch him or even be around him.

And so what we're looking at in this text is truly a scene of desperation. This poor leper, who should be outside the camp away from the people shouting "unclean," comes and presents Himself to Jesus, begging him on his knees, "If you are willing, You can make me clean." (Mark 1:40). I find it fascinating that he asked Jesus, not to be healed, but to be made clean.

He was after more than healing. He wanted to be restored to the community. He wanted to be able to come back into the temple, to worship God, to be able to be touched and to touch others.

You know, on the T.V. church, it's become quite popular to just "claim your healing", as though if you're just bold enough and confident enough, then God simply has to heal you. But God is not under obligation to do what we tell him to, so how much better to come to Him humbly with our requests, whatever they may be and pray with this leper and with Jesus Himself later, "Lord, according to Your will." It's obvious the guy had faith, otherwise he wouldn't have been there to begin with. But it was a faith that trusted God to do what was best.

Folks, there's no question we need to be people who have that kind of faith in our day. If you read the papers yesterday, you might have seen where President Obama is expected to lift the ban on federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. And he's going to make a big White House event of it. The article went on to talk about how great that's going to be for Michigan and how much federal money will come our way since we've already passed Proposal 2 to allow such research in Michigan. And then the article gives a passing mention that some folks don't like that research. And listen to how they say it:

Slide: "Such research is controversial because embryos must be destroyed to obtain the cells; they are typically culled from **fertility clinic leftovers** otherwise destined to be thrown away."

Folks, we all like to be healed when we're sick or hurt – and especially when our loved ones are sick, we want them to be healed. But at what cost? A fertilized embryo is a human being. All he needs, all she needs, is the time and environment to develop. And no human being deserves to be called a "**fertility clinic leftover**" destined for the trash. And there should be no leftovers. And this issue shouldn't be controversial. It's so simple if we just listen to God's Word which tells us that we ought never to do evil that good may come of it. We need to have the eyesight of that leper and understand that there is more to life than getting healed. What we really need in life is to be made clean. And only Jesus can accomplish that.

I love the response of Jesus in this text. The text says that He was "filled with compassion." And Mark uses one of my all time favorite Greek words to describe it, "σπλαγχνισθεισ", Literally, Jesus was "moved in His gut" for him. Then He does something no other Jew at that time would have ever done.

Slide: Jesus healing the leper pic

He "reached out his hand and touched the man." He touched Him, making Himself ceremonially unclean. But nothing can make Jesus unclean, rather He makes everything clean. Folks, there's a sea-change happening here, from the legalism of the Old covenant, to the compassion of the New Covenant. Could Jesus have healed the man without touching him? Of course. He's God, he can do anything. But think of what it must have meant to that man to be touched by Jesus, and then to hear those words, "I am willing... Be clean." No disease can stand against that word of Jesus, and so the text says that "Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured."

Then Jesus does something odd at that point. He sends him away 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." (Mark 1:44) At that point, Jesus wasn't interested in messing up the Judaic Law, He had come to fulfill it. But interesting, he says, show yourself to him... "as a testimony to them." Letting the church leaders know that there was someone here who could heal incurable diseases. At the same time,

he told the healed leper not to tell anyone else. And from our perspective, that's odd. Why wouldn't he want the word to get out and everyone to know? This is what my seminary profs called the "Messianic Secret". Jesus of course knew who he was, the Messiah of the Old Testament and the Savior of the world, but he was careful about the times and the places for that secret to get out. There are I'm sure, a variety of reasons for that, but the bottom line was the He was the One orchestrating the time when He would bring His mission on earth to fulfillment. He wasn't going to let circumstances build up to bring about that event before His time.

Of course, the leper can't help Himself. The Bible says that "Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news!" What could be more natural to someone without hope who has been given new life and hope to speak about that event.

Well, we are in a sermon series built around a picture by Tom Dubois called "Blessed is He".

Slide: Blessed is He

Recreating the scene of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. And in the sermons so far, I have brought out this picture right away. This morning I wanted to set the stage before we placed the man we've been talking about today. And I believe he's in this picture. He's almost invisible. Just kind of tucked in there in the shadow of Jesus, which I'm sure would have suited him just fine, because he understood it wasn't about him. It's about Jesus.

Slide: Highlight "Healed Leper" than bring in his pic

And it's about giving praise and honor to Him. It certainly was on that day as everyone shouted, "Hosanna, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." But why do you think the crowd was so willing to join in with this Messianic welcome? It was because of this guy and thousands of others like him who had been touched by Jesus, who had been made clean by Him, who knew Who Jesus really was and who simply had to "spread the news."

There are some fascinating details about this guy that jump out to me in this picture. In the first place, he's still on his knees, humble and receiving. You know, in that respect we're not much different from the folks in Jesus' day. We don't go down on our knees for just anything. It takes something big. In this case, Someone big. We kneel to worship, to pray, to repent, to receive Christ in communion. He's doing all of that. And this healed leper is the only one in the picture with His hands folded. Again we fold our hands to worship. Others in the picture may be joining in the Palm Sunday event, and we'll meet some of them in the coming weeks, but they're not worshipping Jesus. For them He's a novelty. A curiosity. But folks, when Jesus touches you, that's real – and life-changing.

Then finally, a very interesting detail... take a look at the big picture later. And I don't know if Tom meant for this to happen with this character or not, but on this day when everyone is supposed to be shouting "Hosanna" ...in fact, on a day when they got so loud the Pharisees told Jesus to tell them to quiet down, in the painting, this guy is the only one actually doing it. He's the only one with his mouth open in praise.

Folks, I want to make this very simple. **If you don't see yourself in this position, you most certainly should.** Because Jesus came into this world to do the very same thing for you. In fact, I'm kind of saving that scene for later, but it should be very obvious that in the picture Jesus is reaching out to touch another beggar, and that person is you and me. That's why Jesus came. To touch you and make you clean. That job is just as impossible as it was at that time to heal

someone of leprosy. In fact it's much harder. Leprosy is a disease on the outside. Our disease is on the outside and the inside and all through us. We are sin-ful. That means we are full of sin in thought, word and deed, and nothing we could ever do can make up for that. We cannot make ourselves clean. We must see ourselves on our knees, begging Jesus with that leper, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

And then, listen to the prophecy of Isaiah:

Slide: "... it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand." (Is 53:10 NIV)

In the amazing grace of God, it was His will to crush Jesus and cause Him to suffer as a guilt-offering for you and for me, to be punished for your sins so that God's justice could be fully satisfied in Him and your sinful life made clean and holy. And it was the will of Jesus your Savior to follow the will of God the Father, knowing what it would cost Him, knowing there was no other way. Folks, is there really any more appropriate response than to be where this guy is in this picture?

Slide: "Healed Beggar"

On his knees in worship and praise and awe at the love of God that would reach out to touch someone like him, someone like you, someone like me.

And then too, our response must be to pass that touch on to others. To embrace what has been done for you by Christ in such a way as to be willing to pass that on to others. I want to show you an example of that from the Movie, Molokai. The movie deals with the real-life story of lepers exiled to Molokai, a barren isle off the main isles of Hawaii. There they lived in miserable surroundings, abandoned by the outside world. To alleviate their fate, Father Damien was the first priest to go to Molokai. And he receives some very specific and unsurprising advice from his superior.

Slide: Molokai clip "Don't touch anyone!"

Folks, how can a recipient of the Grace and the touch of Jesus listen to that advice, "Don't touch anyone."? How could you minister that way? How could you serve? How could you show Christ's love? In the end, his compassion did cost Father Damien his life, and with Paul, he counted it all "rubbish" that he might gain Christ and be found in Him.

My prayer for myself and for everyone here is very simple. May we who have been touched by Christ be willing to touch others. May we who have been made clean be ready to "spread the news" so that all might come to praise and welcome their Savior into their lives.

I want to close with prayer this morning, and I want to do that a little bit differently than we normally do it. I want you where you are to just slide off of your pew unto your knees, because there are things that happen there in our hearts that don't tend to happen when we're anyplace else. So on our knees, let us pray:

Lord Jesus, none of us come here to Your house as clean and whole. We are lepers in our sin and shortcomings. But today once again we embrace the cleansing water of our baptism and the abiding Grace of Your Word. On our knees we come to You with the plea of that leper long ago: "If you are willing, You can make me clean." Then O Lord, whisper to our hearts through the Holy Spirit working in Your great and powerful Word: "I am willing, be clean." Lord, make us ready to touch the untouchables of our world and open our mouths to spread the news of Your great love. Amen.

