

Jesus cleanses a leper

⁴⁰ A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." ⁴¹ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" ⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³ After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, ⁴⁴ saying to him, "see that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." ⁴⁵ But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Dear congregation!

Leprosy was a dreaded disease in Jesus' day. It still is. According to the World Health Organization, there are about 600,000 new cases of Hansen's disease, as it is called today, each year. Of course, with the help of modern medicine, possibilities for treatment are better and at least the illness can be contained. But there's still no cure.

A person in Jesus' day who had the disease of leprosy was a social outcast with no means of survival, alienated from family and forced outside the community, and worse than all of those things put together, a person with leprosy was totally and completely unholy, separated from God, damned. When suffering from leprosy, you were as good as dead. The living dead have no place in life. Jewish law prescribes:

He is unclean. He shall dwell alone.

Outside of the camp shall be his dwelling" (Leviticus 13:45-46).

No one wanted to be near them. Ashamed and humiliated, they knew their place. . . at the back of the bus, at the end of the line, and in the rear of the room, where they could remain invisible, hiding in their anonymity, perhaps stuck in their self-pity. Who of us has not been there? We have all had those moments

when we have been BEGGARS, on our knees, without a leg to stand on.

I'll get straight to the point: On the surface, the leper's sickness mirrors the inward sickness of the human heart that is shared by us all. At the heart of every human being there's a basic feeling of unworthiness. It may be just a twinge, or it may be all-consuming; it may lie out in the open, or it may be covered by layers of bravado and false confidence. The messages thrown our way from birth are overwhelming: "Be all you can be. Do the best that you can. It's up to you. You can do it. If you don't do it, no one else will. You can do anything that you choose to do." We have all heard the mantras, the pep-talks and the sales pitches. You CAN, you MUST, you HAVE TO, because no one else will do it for you. We are told that we can trust no one but ourselves. But then the irony! The very same ones who bark such advice nevertheless want us to choose their strategies, and 12-step programs so that we can climb out of our holes and no longer be beggars.

But truth be told, these subtle messages urging us on to perform and be the masters of our own destiny slowly but surely cause a feeling of dis-ease in us. And the dis-ease that these messages stir in us begins to infect our hearts.

Every morning, the heart wakes fearing the disease's power. What if I'm not good enough? What if I don't make the grade. What if I don't live up to expectations. What if... Even though it is unwelcome, it is what the heart depends on and trusts. The leper is defined by his leprosy. Even those who look healthy on the outside and aren't forced to live on the edges of society have a similar sickness. It's the sin of self-help and preservation that is constant and that won't go away by our own attempts to heal ourselves.

We beggars are desperate to fall for such fixes. Is it foolishness? Is it arrogance? Does it matter since we are suckers every time? It does not take us long to discover that the fixes don't work.

We CAN'T ever seem to do enough to stay on top. We CAN'T seem to shake the fear that we still might slip back into the damnable desperation we thought we could leave behind. We thought we could choose the right way but are repeatedly slapped down, sent to the back of the room and scolded that we must try harder.

Deep down inside we're all painfully aware of our weaknesses, our sense of shame and guilt... our sinful nature and we know that, if we were to stand before the judgment seat of God today, we wouldn't have a chance. I don't say this to put us down or make us feel bad; on the contrary, I say it to set the stage for what is the most remarkable word we can ever hear...

This leper knows that on his own he is powerless. But he also senses something very different in the healing ministry of Jesus. He says to Jesus, "If you choose, you can make me clean." And Jesus was moved with "pity", with compassion, or was it that Jesus was moved by anger, which is the alternative and more difficult reading of this text? Is Jesus "angry" at the evil of leprosy? Does Jesus love us so much that He gets angry at the sight of our pain and suffering and the soul-destroying efforts to be "good enough"? Or is Jesus ticked off by the word "if", as if the grace of God is ever conditional? In any case, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him compassionately. He didn't have to do that – touch him. He could have kept the leprosy man at arm's length, as Jewish law commanded, and healed him from afar. But Jesus chooses to touch him, to let him feel His love and genuine concern for him. Just as Jesus would ultimately do for all of us through his passion and his cross. He stretched out his arms in agony, touching and embracing our agony with His unconditional love. And, through the waters of Holy Baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion, Jesus chooses to extend his cleansing and compassionate touch and press it into our hands and heads and mouths.

What Jesus does in this text for the sake of the one leper offers a preview of what God will do on the cross for the sake of the whole world, and ultimately for each one of us individually and personally. The cross brings us back from isolation and restores our relationship with God. Jesus did the unthinkable. He touched a leper. But instead of Jesus becoming infested with the disease, he gave the gift of healing to the sick one. On the cross, Jesus stretched out his hands in healing and compassion again. But this time, he willingly became infected with our sin. He took it on himself and gave us his health and life. He changed our future from endless sickness to everlasting life.

We are graciously cleansed. We cannot choose to do it. A leper cannot change his spots. But Jesus can. And he does. His love is intentional and unconditional: "I do choose. Be made clean!" He gets angry only when we think there is any question about it and that his loving and gracious choice has an "if" in it. And this is so important! Because the more secure you feel in being loved by God, the freer you are to just be yourself and to talk openly about your innermost fears and insecurities and regrets; and the more you open yourself to who you really are deep down inside, the more you feel the cleansing power of God's Spirit, and the freer you become to live in the fullness of God's peace and love. Ultimately, that is what true healing is: resting in God's love and grace.

As it turns out, we get to share this with others. We have the opportunity to become this healing touch for others who feel like outsiders, who feel weak and ashamed for whatever reason. And we can extend this healing touch, not by pounding them over the head with a Bible, but by accepting them for who they are and by offering them the gift of faith and friendship in the name of Jesus Christ. Our gratitude for gracious healing turns us from beggars to "blabbers" – ones who tell this happy story everywhere, extending that ever important human touch of love and acceptance.

(By the way: Jesus told the man to keep it quiet, because He did not want to be misunderstood as a miracle man. Jesus did not want an audience, He wanted a congregation, followers who realized the deeper meaning of being healed by His wounds...)

“Compassion doesn't make the world perfect, but it does let people know we love them and we care about them. That in and of its own has a deep healing effect on people. To have compassion doesn't mean you have to do something gigantic. Sometimes the greatest miracle of all is just to touch someone and tell them that you care. And we do this for we know that, “He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; He was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4-5).

Amen.