

## JESUS TOUCHES THE LEPER

Matthew 8:1-4

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Aub Podlich in this book 'Australian Images' has the poem entitled 'The man who dropped his pants'. 'Once there was a man who dropped his pants in a big department store. People stared and from everywhere shrieking attendants came running. Young man, young man what are you doing, your pants around your knees? But the man never said a word, just stood there, with all his glory bare. The floor manager came- the pant-less one remained unmoved. Then the manager, and finally, the police. Come now, my man, what is all this? The young man finally spoke: 'For thirty minutes I've tried to be served, just as these seven years I've dealt with this darn store, waiting and waiting and nobody sees. Today, after half an hour, when no one came, I dropped my pants! And you see? I have met all the staff on this floor! From the doorman to the manager, they have come rushing to me!' A saint is one who sees such a man before he drops his pants. The church with ears, let it hear! Being isolated and ignored as a person cuts very deep. As one old preacher said, 'The soul that walks alone wanders along the borders of hell.' This morning we will look at a man who was very isolated and alone. In desperation he did something very unacceptable to get attention. We will look and learn from how Jesus reacts to him. One Australian evangelist, Michael Frost, said he reads one of the four gospels every month. He does that, so he is constantly reminded of how Jesus acted. It gives us our mandated model to follow. One of the things that strikes you, as you keep reading the gospels, is the deep compassion of Jesus. His care for the underdog, the down and outers is very noticeable. The gospels often speak of Jesus being deeply moved for the people who (Matthew 9:36) *"...were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."*

In our text we see Jesus has come down the mountain where he had given the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 8:1) *"...Large crowds follow him"*. In verse 2 we are told: *"A man with leprosy came and knelt before him..."* It is written so simply, yet the action was very out of order. Even more so than a man dropping his pants in public. This was just not on. The Greek brings out the surprise of the situation when it says *"And behold (or Look!) a leper had come..."* You see in those days a person with leprosy was supposed to stay away from crowds. Lepers were not to have close contact with anyone. It was the law. Leviticus 13:45-46 says: *"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." Leprosy was a kind of living death. Once declared to be a leper by the priest, they were cut off from contact with their community. They were condemned to an existence of psychological and physical suffering. They could not touch another person, and no one would take the chance of getting near and touching them.

A leper was never a pretty sight. When the disease reached full effect, as with this man, it could be gruesome. The parallel passage in Luke 5:12 says "...he was covered with leprosy". Leprosy as a disease begins with pain in the hands or feet and then numbness follows. The story is told of the missionary who worked amongst lepers. One morning while working he dropped an object on his foot but didn't feel anything. Then he knew he had the disease as well. That Sunday he addressed his congregation, not as fellow believers, but as fellow lepers. The skin in those places that goes numb becomes glossy and scaly. In fact, the word leprosy comes from the Greek 'lepros' which means scale. As the disease progresses these scales became dirty sores and ulcers due to the poor blood supply. The skin, especially around the eyes and ears begins to bunch. Fingers and toes could be absorbed into the swellings and drop off. Eyebrows and eyelashes drop out. Not only could they look terrible, but the leper could also smell terrible. Lepers often sounded terrible because the disease attacks the larynx, leaving the person with a raspy voice. You can imagine how terrible they sounded when they had to keep others away from them by crying out to them.

The biggest fear for the crowd that had followed Jesus was not what they saw or heard. It was the fact that the Old Testament law rendered them ceremonially 'unclean'. A person who was unclean was shut off from all social contacts. They were forced to live alone, an outcaste, shunned by everyone. If you were to touch someone unclean, like a leper, it meant you were also uncleaned and ostracized. Therefore, a leper, when approaching a village or a group of people, had to give a warning and shout 'Unclean! Unclean!'. Leprosy was a slow painful death, a life without any personal contact. No hugs from the kids, no kiss from the wife. Living without ever feeling compassion from another person. The biggest curse of leprosy was its social stigma. People regarded it with superstitious horror. A person with leprosy was regarded as cursed by God. Like with Job, the thought was anyone with the disease must be a very wicked person who was being punished by God. People were very scared to have an 'unclean' leper approach them because the dreadful curse of God might come on them. It was highly irregular, in fact against the law, for the leper to come up to the crowd and approach Jesus. In another event, with the ten lepers at the border between Samaria and Galilee,

when they asked Jesus for healing, Luke writes clearly (Luke 17:12) *"They stood at a distance and called in a loud voice"*.

In 2008 Liz and I were in South Africa. We were staying in the black township of KwaMhlanga an hour north east of Pretoria. We discovered how similar the Africans see HIV/AIDS as the Jews did leprosy. They see it superstitiously as a curse of God. Any one who is confirmed to have AIDS is ostracized. I think of one man we met. All his family and friends completely avoided him. He was left alone in his tin shed of a home. They feared if they touched him they would get the disease. Now with this terrible stigma people are too scared to get their status checked. They deny any possibility of having AIDS. So, they go on having sexual relations with others, often spreading the disease further. You cannot talk directly about the disease with them. In their eyes, it's like cursing that person to death. So, the lot of the AIDS sufferer in Africa is to die a slow, lonely death. That's how it was with the leper who approached Jesus. You can imagine the scene. A huge crowd is gathered. And a leper stands in their midst. It is even worse than a man dropping his pants in the store getting attention. The leper has not shouted 'Unclean!' The crowd is backing away in horror. 'How dare that leper come here like that. Don't let him near you Jesus. Send him away. It's the law for the unclean'. But the leper ignores the crowd and, on his knees, asks for Jesus help (:2): *"Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean"*. He sees Jesus as his only hope. One who can actually heal him. It is only a matter of Jesus being willing. So, will Jesus help an unclean one who has broken the law? The crowd, still backing off, all focus on Jesus. 'Come on Jesus, send him away! Don't let him touch you. Tell him off! He is breaking the law. Get rid of him!' What will Jesus do? The parallel passage in Mark 1:41 tells us that Jesus was *"...filled with compassion..."* The Greek word indicates a very intense emotion. It refers to the churning of the stomach. Not in sickness at the ugly sight, but an agonizing over the situation of another. Jesus feels immense compassion. He sees a man ravaged by the destructive effects of sin. Sin is not just about being 'bad'. The consequences of sin are that we live in a terribly broken world. They involve sickness, and what is often worse, ignorance, fear, prejudice, hatred. Jesus came into the world to save people from sin and its terrible results. And here it was in one of its ugliest forms. Here was the 'unclean'.

What does Jesus do? Look at :3 *"Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man."* He touched him! Can you see the crowd drawing back and gasping: 'He has touched the unclean! Jesus has broken the law. Now he is unclean!' Jesus could have healed the leper simply by giving a command. Why did he touch the leper? Again, it's written so simply but the implications are stunning. My New Testament lecturer, Dr. Tom Wilkinson, wrote a little commentary on Mark. He writes the story of a medical doctor

in a foreign country examining a patient with leprosy. After the examination the doctor gave the man a friendly pat on the back. Immediately the patient burst into tears. So, the doctor, asked the interpreter: 'Why is the patient crying, what's going on?' The interpreter replied: 'Those are tears of joy. Never has anyone touched him in friendship.' Jesus reached out and touched the man. In one simple gesture Jesus cut through the fear, the stigma. He reached out and touched the man. Jesus identified with him. He cared. He got involved. Even at the risk of public criticism and the condemnation of the Pharisees. Jesus reached out and touched the man. What a powerful image that is. The imagery here again reminds me of the time in South Africa. We were in that tin hut of the man with AIDS. We were with a wonderful African woman, a nurse. As she sat next to the patient on his bed, she hugged him and talked gently about God's grace. The man, whose whole family and friends had abandoned him so thrived on being touched, hugged and gently spoken to by this wonderful Christian woman. Jesus touched the man. But he was not just compassionate. He also had the power to heal. As our text says (:3) *"I am willing...Be clean!"* And immediately he was cured of leprosy. The Son of God cared deeply and brought wonderful healing.

Now you notice that Jesus did not disregard the law. He instructed the healed leper to go to the priest. The Law of Moses required he be examined and officially declared clean. Later when the priests and Pharisees charged Jesus with blasphemy, their own declaration that the leper was healed would bear testimony to this act of God. You also notice that Jesus tells the man (:4) *"...not to tell anyone"*. There were enough people following Jesus because of the sensationalism with the miracles. All the hype was distorting Jesus' main message; *"Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand."* The Son of God had come to conquer sin itself, not just the gruesome consequences by his miracles. The Son of God, God Almighty himself, reached down and 'touched' our humanness and the contact made him 'unclean' as he took on our sin. Isaiah describes him as if he were an ugly leper: (Isaiah 53:2-4) *"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely, he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God..."* You notice how Isaiah describes the suffering servant as some one so ugly no one wants to look at him. And then he writes *"Surely, he took up our infirmities, he carried our sorrow."* Isaiah hits us between the eyes and makes us see that it is our sin, that makes Jesus unclean, cursed, like a leper, rejected by everyone. We are clean only by what Jesus did on the cross. This is the message that has to come through: Christ came to deal with our sin. We see this deeper issue come out with the leper. He is healed and declared clean. Yet he is disobedient to the instructions of Jesus. The parallel passage in Mark 1 points out that

he talked everywhere about what happened to him. You can appreciate his excitement. But doing that he ruined Jesus ministry in the towns. From then on Jesus could only go out into the countryside because the crowds were so huge. Yet Jesus did achieve his purpose. By his wounds we who believe are declared 'clean', perfect in God's eyes. Such is Jesus' grace. He touches our lives with his Spirit, no matter what our sin, or how society views us.

Now it's our turn. We as the church, as Christ's body, are called to do his work in the world. We are challenged to reach out and touch others with the love of Jesus. We are called to model Christ's immense compassion. Let's move beyond institutionalized religion. Let's not be complacent in our middleclass wealth and comfort. Let's silence the ever-louder voices of the critics who say the church is on the nose. Let's be involved in acts of care and deep compassion. Let's reach out to the abused, the homeless. Let's touch the lonely and ostracized. Let's advocate for the weak and poor. As Peter writes (1 Peter 2:12) *"Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God..."* Christ reached out and *"...touched the leper. 'I am willing' he said"*. Are we?