

<sup>CEB</sup> Matthew 8:1-4 Now when Jesus had come down from the mountain, large crowds followed him. 2 A man with a skin disease came, kneeled before him, and said, “Lord, if you want, you can make me clean.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus reached out his hand and touched him, saying, “I do want to. Become clean.” Instantly his skin disease was cleansed. 4 Jesus said to him, “Don’t say anything to anyone. Instead, go and show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded. This will be a testimony to them.”

## INTRO

As I began preparing to write this sermon, I was surprised to see this passage was selected as a means of speaking about physical health. I imagine you are, too. How does a person with a disability, a person who is differently-abled, project “good” physical health? The reality is that, from a worldly standard and a purely literal reading of the scriptures, one can easily come to understand physical limitations as something that should be viewed as a bad thing, an unwanted thing. In fact, one might possibly come to view such physical limitations as the result of sin.

We, as a people, are so uncomfortable with talking about our physical limitations that we often cling to the positive stories around differently-abled persons. I remember someone who walked up to me shortly after I received my first appointment as a pastor. They smiled and said, “I am so proud of all that you have overcome.” I had my hearing aids out because the room was very noisy, and I was reading their lips...I remember asking them, “What do you mean by that?” Their response was, “You know, your hearing, speech, and all that stuff.”

Perhaps that’s how we feel this morning; we want to walk up to the leper and say, “Congratulations on all that you have overcome! It was your faith, your gumption, your initiative that got Jesus to notice and ultimately heal you.” We want to cling to the “success story”, we want to skip straight to the the end of the story, and to stay in that moment where Jesus heals the man. Yet, in order to read the biblical text in context, we must acknowledge the pain, the grief, and the suffering that the leper went through in order to receive the transformational power of God.

One commentator notes that this man comes to Jesus “perhaps bruised and disfigured, he appears before Jesus and kneels. I can only imagine how painful this gesture might have been for this man. I imagine his body utterly aching; still, he kneels down. His desperation is as acute as his pain and his brave faith.”<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Theological Prospective - Feasting on the Gospels

leper, having been cut off from taking part in society, banned to isolation by the boundaries put in place by the religious society he lived in, further takes a risk in potentially being rejected by Jesus.

Not only was he barred from worshiping in the Temple, but those considered unclean were not allowed in the area that surrounded the temple. They, according to the boundaries put in place, were supposed to live alone outside the city or camp away from their family and their friends. They were also considered unfaithful, and their state of being, the ailment that racks their body, is a impurity or unclean.

One commentator notes, “As a sign of their unclean condition, their clothes were to be torn and their hair kept disheveled. They were to cover their upper lip and cry “unclean, unclean” whenever they were in the presence of others for as long as their condition continued and they were deemed unclean”<sup>2</sup>

The reality is that this man’s actions, the pain he endures to kneel before Christ, the rules and laws he broke out of desperation, and the movement of his physical body is an enormous theological statements. This body comes before the Lord bound by his wounds, aching and pained by the treatment of his own people, and is now throwing himself on the floor before Christ. What does this say about his beliefs, hope, trust, and desire? What do his spoken and unspoken words say?

Our text for this morning is the only healing narrative in which the person comes before Jesus and gives Jesus a choice. The man knows that he is asking Jesus to break the laws, and he gives Jesus a chance to refuse...but Jesus does not back away. The crowds who were with Jesus didn’t know what to do or how to react, but surely they would have instinctively fallen back and moved away from the man, leaving Jesus standing there all alone with this leprous man coming towards him.

But Jesus didn’t move away or fall back! He just stood there, and for the first time in years, someone was actually showing interest in this man for who he was instead of his disease.

The man does not ask to be healed or cured of his disease; he asked to be cleansed, or he wants to be labeled as clean. For the disease itself is not so bad compared to the social exclusion that has become and is unbearable. He longs to be in a relationship with others.

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<sup>2</sup> A Healing Homiletic page 130

Jesus sees this man, looks at him, and says, “I am willing. He then reaches out his hand and touches the man. The crowds look to one another in shock. When Jesus reaches out to touch the man, he not only crosses the boundaries set in place by the community of faith, but he also runs the risk of becoming polluted and unclean. Yet, our gospel lesson tells us that Jesus does not become unclean or unacceptable....instead, the man with leprosy becomes clean and accepted.

Jesus’ touch shows that God’s love comes to our skin and bodies as much as Jesus comes into our way of being, thinking, and feeling. God’s touch to this unclean and sick body changes not just the unclean state of the body, but his touch also changes the heart and mind of this man forever. Here is the thing: our focus this morning cannot be on the “healing of the body,” for that was not the issue at stake - the issue at hand is the boundaries that declare this man to be unclean.

The man is sent to the priests in order to begin the seven-day process of purification, and on the eighth day, he is once again welcomed back into the community. Where he is once again treasured as a person made in the sacred image of God.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we must hear, see, and embody what Jesus is teaching the disciples and us in our gospel lesson this morning. If we are to be followers of Jesus Christ, then we must live out the sacrificial love of God as we reflect on the ways that we have contributed to the boundaries of exclusion.

As a hearing-impaired person, I remember asking some friends at Duke Divinity School to move to a quieter place so that I could take part in studying with them. I was told that if I could not meet where they wanted to meet, then my contribution to the group was not needed...what happened? The group set up a boundary, and I was excluded.

These boundaries are not just found in the inflexibility of others. Maybe we need to ask what does our building say about one’s different abilities. For example, at Mount Olivet, a person with a wheelchair can only sit in the back pews and is unable to come up on the stage. At Wesley Chapel and Rock Springs in order to enter into the fellowship hall from the sanctuary, a person in a wheelchair must go out of the building in order to get downstairs to the fellowship hall. At Floral Hills, the wheelchair-bound person must enter into a different entrance than a majority of the church.

These are the ways in which our bodies are broken. Not our physical human bodies but the body of Christ. As the body of Christ, we have unintentionally excluded a group of people from normal participation in the life of the church. In setting up these unintentional barriers, we have fractured and shattered our bodies. We must then work to create spaces in which we come before Jesus and ask for healing.

Help us, Savior, make our body whole. Provide physical healing to these parts of your body, Lord.

How do we work toward this? While we cannot change the layout of our buildings, we can make sure that our attitudes reflect the relational love of God as we become aware of these unintentional ways that we exclude people with our bodily language, views/attitudes, or physical barriers such as building layout

This might mean that a group of people should sit next to the wheel-chair spaces at Mount Olivet or that we should be intentional about walking with the wheel-chair bound person out of the front entrance of Wesley Chapel or Rock Springs so they can enter into the fellowship hall together. It might look like being intentional about using the same entrance at Floral Hills so that others do not feel left out. It means that we, like Christ, must reach out across the boundaries set in place with a touch of care so that all persons might know they are treasured by God.

We also must be intentional in seeking to reach across the boundaries of life. Suffering, after all, is a part of life, and each of us experiences suffering in different ways as we travel through life. There are times when we feel just like the leprous man found within our gospel lesson this morning. An event or a series of events happens in our lives, and we feel completely broken.

A diagnosis, a death, a job loss, severe depression. Financial difficulties or a breakdown in relationships. This year has been one where it feels like our whole lives have been turned upside down - exclusion, isolation, new laws that state we don't matter. They leave us in physical, mental, and emotional anguish. We feel shattered and broken in our individual bodies and our spirits. We need to reach across the divide. How do we do this? Through our phone calls, by offering to drop a meal off, by praying for one another, and by creating spaces to be vulnerable and yet affirmed.

My prayer and hope is that we realize that we are treasured by God. The first step towards reconciliation and healing is found in not seeking healing of our broken bodies or the diseases that afflict us. It is found in the ways that we bring down the barriers that divide us, healing the body of Christ.

I heard it said that it is the world that makes someone disabled... people who are differently-abled never view themselves as disabled until they are reminded of their inabilities by the walls of separation. Church, might we find ways to share God's loving touch with one another? That we might truly embrace each other's pains and experiences, and as we, like the man with leprosy, find ways to worship God with our broken, imperfect bodies, minds, and hearts. For in offering our brokenness to Christ, he responds with loving kindness as he reaches out to touch

us and remind us of the treasure that we all are. Treasures that are worthy of new life in the midst of hopelessness.