

# THE ATTRACTION OF A CLEANSED LIFE

Sermon, February 5, 2012

Text: Mark 1:40-45

Our Gospel reading this morning is a (very) brief story of Jesus' encounter with a leper, which is a fairly straightforward and typical Markan account of Jesus' interaction with people. This passage also happens to be the first passage I preached from as a solo pastor, on August 4, 1991. I told that congregation in Berwick, Pennsylvania that when I was interviewing for the pastorate, one of the Pastor Nominating Committee members, Dave Force (*who also happened to be the superintendent of schools in Berwick*), asked, "If you had to pick one thing, one main theme, that you are trying to convey in your sermons, what would that be?" I replied, in so many words, "In every sermon, I want to try and draw people to Jesus Christ, I want to help others know Him better; I want others to better understand, love and follow Him. More specifically, my professional goal as a pastor and my compelling, personal motivation as a Christian is to be an agent, a conduit, through whom Jesus Christ can draw people to Himself. I believe with all my heart that as we come to know Jesus Christ, He in turn begins to affect every area of our lives for the good, enabling us to be better equipped and motivated to address and serve the spiritual, physical and social needs of our families, our friends, our community **and** our world." (*Dave, by the way, went home to our Lord just under six years ago; he passed away February 19, 2006 at the age of 60 from cancer. He was a delightful, larger-than-life, highly respected, much-loved, firm yet gregarious man who is dearly missed by his family, friends and community.*)

In that interview and in that first sermon, I told people that as I read through the Gospels, I found Jesus to be utterly delightful. People of all age groups were attracted and drawn to Him. Jesus was the kind of man people invited to dinner, and He came! He enjoyed people. He walked our roads in life. He had friends He dearly loved. He liked to go to parties and to weddings. Children loved Him, and He delighted in them as well. Adults were affected so much by Him that some just wanted to reach out and touch His clothes. His life was a constant demonstration that there were only two things that really mattered in this life – God and people – for they were the only things that lasted forever. Jesus was a compassionate man. He cared deeply and was not at all hesitant to show it. He showed his tears plainly on His open face, whether He was weeping for the loss of a city (*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ..."*) or the loss of a friend (*at the graveside of Lazarus*). He touched people at the deepest level. He wanted to heal not only blindness and leprosy, but He wanted to heal the things that would pervert or prevent joy and beauty and freedom and justice.

In this passage this morning, a man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Try to hear with ears of sympathy what this man is really asking: "If you are willing, you can restore me to normal human life. If you are willing, you can bring me back into the community, back into a normal relationship with other people. If you are willing, you can make me more acceptable to people. If you are willing, you can restore my life, you can make it possible for me to go anywhere I choose and not have everyone stare at me, everyone avoid me, everyone fear me, everyone talk about how unfortunate I am. If you are willing, you can make me clean!"

Notice what Jesus did. He cried out, "Be healed ... but don't get too close!" No, He didn't do that. Jesus breaks every rule about how one should protect oneself from someone with leprosy and reaches out His hand and *touches* him, perhaps the first time that poor man has been touched in years. And then He says, "Oh, I am willing. Be clean!" Appreciate how remarkable this simple act was. No one touched people with leprosy. This man may have gone for many years without the simplest human contact. According to the standards of the day, it was outrageous for Jesus to do such a thing; the law was very strict and clear ... DO NOT TOUCH LEPROSERS. But that was part of Jesus' character ... He could be outrageous. Jesus was an extraordinary man who flung furniture down the steps of the temple, and with a makeshift whip forcibly attacked and drove out those who were desecrating the place. He associated with what the religious people of the time would classify as riff-raff. In fact, He was accused of being a drunk because He associated with drunks, of being a glutton, and basically having tacky taste in friends. It is a profound irony that the Son of God visited this planet and one of the chief complaints against Him was that He was not religious enough.

Jesus was outspoken and bold, painfully frank, and forever trampling on the toes of the religious leaders. He was immensely loving and caring, secure and uncompromising. He was a fascinating man,

a humorous man, a loving, enjoyable, firm, secure, gentle, tough man ... He was the only truly whole man Who ever existed (*with the possible exception of the pre-fall Adam*).

The leper here experiences healing; he is cleansed of his disease and, against Jesus' admonition, he runs around and tells everyone about it! Soon so many people were coming to see Jesus that He had to retreat to lonely places, and still the crowds pressed to see Him. There's a sermon in itself here, but note: there are few things that attract people to Jesus Christ more than a life that has been genuinely and visibly cleansed by the Savior! Those who live cleansed lives, who visibly demonstrate their moral, emotional and physical cleansing, *such people draw attention*, and especially in a culture that is growing increasingly unclean. It's not so much that clean living is *the way* to salvation, as it is that it points TO the way of salvation ... which is only found in Jesus Christ. Cleansed lives draw others to the Savior.

Jesus was always raising eyebrows among the elite by doing such things: touching lepers, associating with less than reputable people, talking with outcasts. Note that I said talking *with* them, not talking *down to* them. In Jesus encounters with the woman at the well, with the woman caught in adultery, with Mary Magdalene, with that crooked little cheat of a tax collector Zaccheus and so on Jesus never talked down to them; He talked with them, treating them with dignity and respect. And Jesus didn't just *talk* with them. He had dinner with them, He proclaimed the grace of God to them, and He brought them into the fold, into the kingdom of God. As I've mentioned before, Jesus never used "Bad Dog" lectures with them (*"Look what you did. You broke that law, you made a mess, you disobeyed your Master. Bad dog!"*). As He told the Pharisees on one occasion, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." If Jesus used Bad Dog lectures at all, it was with those who were *self-righteous*. The ones who really tried our Lord's patience were those who thought they were somehow a cut above the other sinners; those who thought *others* needed "fixing," not them ... those who could see what's wrong with everyone else except themselves.

As Jesus kept reminding people, He had come to seek and touch lives. He came to engage and save those who were lost, to rescue the perishing, to salvage the lives of those who were falling apart and/or self-destructing, to bring them all home to the Father. This is not to say that Jesus didn't care about behavior. Jesus cared very much about behavior, especially behavior that was ruining lives and causing ruin to others. When Jesus brought sinners into His community, He never said it was okay to keep on sinning. No, He basically told them to cut it out, to go and sin no more.

As long as there's been a church, there's been a great debate about the best institutional model for the church. This is grossly oversimplifying it, but basically two models prevail throughout the centuries, both of which have merits and shortcomings. The two models are that of the School, and that of the Hospital. The School school maintains the church should be primarily a school for saints. It is there to train the godly in godly living. Thus, before someone is allowed to enter the membership of the church, the prospective member needs to "prove" he/she is a fit student by being an articulate believer, by giving clear verbal evidence of "saving faith;" to be a "saint," so to speak, before he or she enters the church. Others (like Luther and Calvin) maintain that the church should primarily be a hospital for sinners. You enter the church like you enter a hospital: you recognize you're sick and you want to put yourself under the care of the Doctor whose touch can heal you of the disease called sin. Every member comes to this community for the same reason - to find healing for a sin-sick soul, and to put their lives in the hands of the Great Physician. You don't get yourself well first and then enter the hospital! You don't get it all together in order to enter the church. You don't get your life cleaned up in order to encounter Jesus Christ. And the Hospital Church is, more often than not, where the Great Physician chooses to encounter you. Let's be clear: No one has to be healthy enough in order to be welcome at the hospital. All one has to do is recognize his or her need to be there. Our failures, sins, hurts, our diseases, our less-than-saintly traits aren't reasons to be excluded from the church community. We are here because we need to be here, not because we deserve to be. We are all a little bit sick; that is what binds us together as a church. (*When I last talked about this seven or so years ago, someone mentioned that actually, a teaching hospital might be the best description for the church. That idea has merit!*)

We are here because we confess our sin, we recognize we are "sick," we are in need of healing, and we seek the Savior's touch. We enter the hospital-church to find healing and direction and guidance in healthy living. The church is being used by Jesus Christ to attract and bring together in one body all those who need the cleansing, healing, loving and guiding touch of a Savior.

And that includes all of us.