

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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February 12, 2006
6th Sunday after Epiphany
Mark 1:40-45
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: 2 Kings 5:1-14
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 32
Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27
Gospel: Mark 1:40-45

If You Are Willing, You Can Make Me Clean

When I was growing up, my younger sister had a white cat that she dearly loved. One day my brother and I—my older brother was over visiting us and he wanted to pitch some softball—fast-pitch softball. He wanted to practice more because he wanted to pitch. So I was out catching them in the side yard and the cat laid down about half way between me and him and just watched the ball whipping over his head. Unfortunately, one pitch came a little bit low as in half way to the plate and hit the cat right in the head. The cat made a noise I have never heard before or since. My brother thought he had killed my sister's cat. My little sister was pretty shook up, like you would imagine a child with it's pet and how her heart went out to that cat and how concerned she was and how it turned her stomach upside down. You can imagine that, can't you? It is pretty easy to see how a child would have their heart go out to their pet.

It is also easy to see how a parent has their heart go out when their child is sick and there is not much they can do for that child except hold the child and maybe brush their hair off their face. Your heart gets turned into knots at times like that, doesn't it? You want to do more but sometimes you just can't.

The word that we have in our text this morning for compassion, that Jesus had compassion for that leper, is a word that literally it says his stomach was tied up and twisted up and in knots. You can kind of imagine that and how that is related to having compassion for someone because that is what we experience. That is what we feel. We can relate to that—having our stomach do flip flops because we are so concerned to see things go well. My sister and her cat—which lived by the way—us and our children, but think if we have that much more for a child than a child for a cat, think of how much more God has for us—how his heart goes out to us. How his stomach is turned upside down and twisted around when he sees us. The difference between us and God, of course, is while both we and God are willing to help, there are many times in our lives when you and I are not able to help. This morning as we hear that leper say to Jesus, *"If you are willing, you can make me clean"*, we are reminded that Jesus is both willing and able to help us, who are sinful, weak and troubled human beings. What a comfort that is for you and I—that our God, who is so high above us and so far beyond us, still has his heart go out to us. Not because we come to him, but because he is God and he loves us and his heart goes out to us because of who he is.

Jesus had compassion on a leper that came and threw himself to his knees. The leper said, *"If you are willing, you can make me clean."* He makes his confession of Jesus as more than just a man, more than just a teacher, but as Jesus is someone who has

divine power who can heal him. Jesus, we are told, had compassion on the man. That compassion led him to action. The first action you might miss just as you read through this reading from Scripture. We are told that *Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man*. It doesn't sound like much, but if you remember the nature of leprosy, touching a leper, the only thing worse than touching a leper that made you more ceremonially unclean in the eyes of the Jews was to touch a dead body. To touch a leper would have made more news in the area than actually cleansing him or healing him. If you have ever sat down and said that you were going to read through the Bible cover to cover and you get through Genesis and you get through Exodus and you think you are doing pretty good, then you get to Leviticus and you have all those laws as you read through it—there are a lot of laws that deal with it being ceremonially clean and ceremonially unclean and all the things you had to do. The ceremonially clean and unclean was to highlight that we can't be right with God on our own and leprosy was one of the things that made you ceremonially unclean. You had to live outside of the assembly of God's people. You couldn't be a part of it. You had to be isolated and off by yourself or with other lepers.

This man had probably not been touched by someone that wasn't a leper for as long as he had been a leper. Jesus reached out his hand and touched him. The rabbis of Jesus' day, some of them bragged that when they saw a leper coming close they would throw stones at them to keep them away from them. That is how upright and devout they were to the Lord. They threw stones at lepers. One rabbi bragged about that. His heart was focused on himself. Yet here is Jesus with his heart and his compassion going out to this man, so he touches him.

There are things about you and I that do more than just make us ceremonially unclean. There are things that you and I want hidden from everyone else in this room, isn't there? We don't want other people to know what we are in our innermost thoughts, in the deep recesses of our hearts. We have things that we want hidden from everyone else in this world and if it ever got out to other people and became common knowledge, we would be terrified. We would be chilled to the very marrow of our bones.

The truth of the matter is that God knows every one of those things, and God, in his love, reaches out and touches us. We saw it happen this morning, didn't we? God reached out to Mariah, who was born in sin, just like all of us our, and God reached out with his love through water and the Word and said, "You are my own. Your sins are forgiven. You are a part of my family." God's compassion comes out to us. It reaches out and touches us with his Holy Spirit and leads us to believe that Christ is our Lord and Savior.

We know that God is willing. At times we live as though he is not. At times we live as though we have to earn God's love or earn God's favor or else he won't love us. "I have to do this or I have to do that and if I don't, God won't love me." God loves us because he is love. He doesn't love us because of who we are. He reaches out and touches us when we are untouchable. He reaches out and expresses his love to us when no one else would love us if they knew all these secrets within our hearts. God loves us even though our sins killed his son. God loves us deeply, completely and absolutely and he always will no matter who we are or what we have done. God is moved to compassion.

His insides are turned upside down because he hurts for us that our sins have damned us to hell. So he makes us clean through the life and death of Christ. He is willing to do this and he is able to do this just as he was willing to show compassion. He was able to act on it. He touched the man. Then he said to him, "*Be clean!*" It wasn't gradual. It wasn't a slow recovery. It says, *Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.* Immediately—God's power is of such a nature that it goes beyond the laws of nature that you and I are bound by, just like God's love goes beyond anything we can understand. His power goes beyond anything that we can understand. And on that day and at that place, he saw fit to heal this man of his leprosy. And he did it even though it was going to cause him problems.

It was going to cause him problems. It was going to hamper his mission because he told this man, "*don't tell this to anyone.*" He told him this because he knew there would be more and more crowds coming and he wouldn't be able to carry out the ministry as he intended. Even though as true God he could see what was going to happen, his compassion still went over that and he still reached out and healed this man. And sure enough, even though the man had been given a strong warning by Jesus not to tell people, it was natural, I suppose you would say, he couldn't help himself, I suppose you would say, and he went out and told people. The crowds got so big that he couldn't go freely in and out of the city anymore, so he had to stay out in lonely places—off by himself, not being able to do his ministry exactly as he would have preferred—but then again, he would have preferred not to have been on earth at all, I suppose. But he was on earth because you and I and everyone else that has ever been born and lived are sinners and he had to come and redeem us.

So once again human beings threw a wrench into God's plans, yet God knew this would always happen. Yet in love, he still acted. He was willing and is able because his love is that incredible.

Here is one thing that I think is kind of interesting. God tells this man not to go and tell others about what Jesus had done because it would draw people for the wrong reasons. They would want that bread king, that miracle worker, and not listen to his message and he wouldn't be able to have them focus on their sins and their need for a Savior. You and I, however, have been told to always be ready to give an answer for the hope that we have. You and I have been told, however, "You are my witnesses to Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth." We have been told to go and tell. Yet often we are more comfortable sitting back and saying, "If they want to know about Jesus, let them come to church. They can learn there." We have been commanded to go. "Go make disciples." Yet, I suppose you could argue that it is natural for us because we say to ourselves, "Someone else is better at it than I am. That is why we have called a pastor. That is his job. That's not my job." It is natural. We can come up with all the reasons why answering God's call and obeying his command doesn't make sense to us. The fact of the matter is that God has called us to do it and yet, we do the opposite. At times we don't share Christ with others and Christ ends up not being able to go into their homes, and he stays outside in lonely places simply because you and I have disobeyed his commands just like this leper did.

We have been healed. We have been touched by God. We have the opportunities to grow in our knowledge of God so that we can share God with others. We might be concerned over our pets or over physical sicknesses, and I am not saying that we shouldn't be, but there are greater concerns for the spiritual welfare of souls. People are living not knowing that Christ has lived and died to take away their sins. You and I know this. People are living worried and anxious and uncertain about what the next day will bring. You and I know that God is in control of all things and he has promised to give us all that we need for life. You and I have a comfort, a confidence, a peace of knowing that we have a God who loves us this much and he says, "Don't be worried about tomorrow. Worry about me because tomorrow will take care of itself." He says, "Don't worry about what you are going to eat or drink or wear, but seek first my kingdom because your heavenly Father knows you need these things." We can live with a confidence and a comfort that the world around us, I think, is looking for and longing for. But all too often, you and I remain silent, change the subject, and don't want to talk about Christ. In that sense, we are exactly like this leper because we are disobeying what God has called us to do and we are leaving him in lonely places.

God's love and his mercy reaches out to us—again, not because of what we do for him, but because of who he is. His love and his mercy takes away our sin of indifference, of silence, and of not sharing the Gospel of Christ. When we recognize this, when we see this and when we receive his very body and blood and he says, "In spite of your sins, I love you, and I have forgiven you for Jesus' sake"—it touches us. It strengthens us. It moves us to want to share what we have with others so that they can know the peace that we always say passes all understanding, so that they can know it and feel it and live in it day after day.

So, do our hearts go out to them? Do our hands reach out to them? Our voices can speak of God's love in Christ.