

“You Can Make Me Clean,” Luke 5:12-16 (First Sunday in Lent, March 10, 2019)

<sup>12</sup> While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” <sup>13</sup> And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him. <sup>14</sup> And he charged him to tell no one, but “go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them.” <sup>15</sup> But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. <sup>16</sup> But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

## PRAY

We are working our way through the gospel of Luke this spring in these weeks leading up to Easter, and as we study these texts we’re going to read a lot about the miracles performed by Jesus. One thing you must remember as we study these miracles is that they are not only naked displays of power by Jesus.

Certainly, these miracles actually occurred in history and they are meant to demonstrate that Jesus has all the power of God at his disposal. Jesus is fully God and fully man.

But these miracles are also signs, or parables. Jesus performed the miracles he did in the ways he did to teach us something about the world we live in and what he came to do in it.

The miracle in our text for today, the healing of the man with leprosy, is no exception. Jesus is not just showing off his abilities by freeing this man from his disease, but he’s teaching us about a very important subject: the nature of sin. It’s an especially appropriate topic this time of year, as this is the first Sunday in Lent, the Lenten season is traditionally the time when the church focuses on repentance. Jesus wants us to see two things about sin, and these are the two points of the sermon: first, the contagious, dangerous nature of sin. Second, the power of Jesus alone to heal.

First, the contagious, dangerous nature of sin. The Greek word translated as “leprosy” in Luke 5 could refer to any skin disease, rash, or severe acne. It literally means “scaly.” In ancient Israel, anyone who had a breakout on the skin of virtually any kind had to report in person to the priests.

The priests, in addition to their duties around the temple and teaching the Bible, also served as public health officials, and we read in Leviticus 13 of certain regulations were set out for them about how to deal with people with these skin problems. The priests had to be very careful with these diseases as some of them were highly contagious. There was no effective treatment for them, so if they didn’t catch one early it could spread to the entire nation.

At the time the law was given, the people of Israel were in the middle of their forty-year wilderness wandering. They didn’t live in houses or in cities, they lived in tents. If someone reported to the priests with a skin problem, and the rash or the acne didn’t change or get worse over a period of seven or fourteen days, the person was declared clean and could go back to the camp.

As I was getting ready to preach on Luke 5 I noticed on one of my forearms I have a patch of dry skin. That's never happened to me before, but as I've gotten older my skin dries out during the winter the way it didn't when I was younger. I'm pretty sure it's not leprosy, I'm certain I'm not contagious, but it dawned on me as I read Leviticus 13 that had I lived in ancient Israel I would have had to go to the priests and just make sure everything was ok.

But in Israel if the rash spread over those fourteen days, if it clearly got deeper into the skin, if the skin clearly became infected, the priests had only one prescription for the sick person: isolation.

Yet the man who approached Jesus in Luke 5 didn't just have a contagious rash. He was "full of leprosy." Luke, ever the doctor, gives us the precise medical term in verse 12. Almost certainly to be "full of leprosy" meant the man had what we now call Hansen's disease.

Hansen's disease is an ancient disease. We can read accounts of it from before biblical times, but the pathology of it wasn't identified until the nineteenth century. It is a long-term bacterial infection of the nervous system. It leads to the inability to feel pain in certain parts of your body, which in turn always will eventually lead to severe injuries. The inability to feel pain might at first sound like a gift but it is actually incredibly dangerous. If you can't feel that the pot is full of boiling water, then you do irreparable damage to your hands when you reach in the pot and leave your hand there for even five seconds. If you can't feel the nail you stepped on penetrating the sole of your foot, then not only do you cut yourself but, if it goes unnoticed long enough, infection can set in and require amputation.

On top of that, Hansen's disease causes disfigurement. It can cause growths of tumors all over the face and a clawing effect in the extremities, to the point where you couldn't use your fingers anymore or your toes to steady you as you walk.

It is a horrible disease. Thankfully now it has been all but eradicated in the United States as it can be treated with a multi-drug therapy, but that's only in the last forty years or so. Until then the only way to treat Hansen's disease was the same way they did in ancient Israel: through isolation. In fact, the last leprosarium in the United States was located just five-hour drive from here in Carville, Louisiana, on the Mississippi River. Until the 1990's it was still used to house people with Hansen's disease, when it was also a federal prison. Neil White, an Oxford resident, wrote a book a few years ago called *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*, about his time in prison there and the leprosy patients he met during his incarceration.

But in ancient Israel there were no leprosaria and there were no hospitals. The only defense society had against it was isolation, forcing the lepers outside the camp, because Hansen's is highly contagious when you live in close contact with a carrier.

So we read this in the law of God: "The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' <sup>46</sup> He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp." Leviticus 13:45-46.

As horrible as the disease itself was, the isolation might have been even worse. Lepers were declared to be “unclean” under the law. That meant they couldn’t come to the temple for worship, nor could they come into contact with any other people for then they would be unclean. In fact, they had an affirmative duty to warn people away who were approaching them.

Some of you I know feel overwhelmed with human contact. When you have really small children in the home and they are tugging on you all the time, 16 hours or 18 hours a day saying, “Mommy, mommy,” “Daddy, daddy,” the idea of a few weeks in total isolation might sound like heaven. But human beings cannot survive without contact with others. There is a reason why solitary confinement in the prison system is to be regulated so carefully, because prisoners will go insane if deprived long enough of all human contact.

We’re not told how long this man “full of leprosy” has been in isolation. Maybe for months, maybe for years. Yet now he meets Jesus. By this time word of Jesus and his miraculous powers have spread all over Galilee. He’s cast out demons, he’s healed the sick. He’s probably already cured leprosy in some others. So this man comes to Jesus and says, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”

“And Jesus stretched out his hand *and touched him*, saying, ‘I will; be clean.’ And immediately the leprosy left him.” Luke 5:13.

Jesus touches the man with leprosy. **Why did he do that?** He didn’t have to. Next week we’ll see how Jesus heals a paralyzed man just by speaking to him. In chapter seven we’ll read how Jesus heals the centurion’s servant while still many miles away from the man.

Jesus doesn’t have to touch to heal. Why, then, does he do it *even though it’s seemingly a violation of the law of Moses to do so?* Anyone who touched him under the law of Moses would have become ceremonially unclean himself – so why does Jesus do it?

A lot of people today will say the answer is simple: **Jesus never let the law get in the way of showing compassion to others.** “This man was an outcast and needed human contact, so Jesus ignored the law. The priests lacked compassion, but Jesus did not.” You’ll hear this all the time in certain circles of professing Christianity today.

For example, a couple of weeks ago delegates from all over the world in another Christian denomination gathered in St. Louis for a general conference. At this conference these brothers and sisters were debating whether or not to amend their book of discipline to allow for the ordination and marriage of gay and lesbian members of their church.

Those who pushed for this change argued like this: “Jesus loved the outcasts of society. He constantly worked to bring people in. He didn’t let the law get in his way. If he thought the law kept people away from God, he disregarded the law to show compassion to his neighbors.”

They argued: “Those of you who oppose this change say you’re just following the Bible, just following the law of God, but our gay and lesbian friends tell us that this law is hurting them. In

fact, what you're doing is practicing hate toward them. Jesus said to love and show compassion to everyone. He criticized the priests when they failed to show compassion to the hurting. You are in the wrong. If your neighbor says you are hurting them, you must stop. You must disregard this outdated law in order to show compassion to your neighbors. You must stop being like the priests in the Bible and start following the example of Jesus."

But is that what Jesus did? Was he disregarding the law to show compassion to his neighbor? We read in Luke 5:14, "And he charged him to tell no one, but 'go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them.'" In Leviticus 14, the chapter after all the instructions about isolating someone with leprosy, we read about the ceremony you are to go through if your leprosy has been healed. It was very involved, the ceremony took eight days to complete, and it involved offering animal sacrifices.

If Jesus didn't care about the law, he would have never told the man, "OK, now that you no longer have leprosy thanks to what I've done, go through all these procedures with the very priests who refused to let anyone touch you and who put you in isolation all these years." On the contrary, he upheld and honored the priests' authority by sending the man to them.

Remember, the miracles of Jesus aren't only miracles. **They are also parables.** The man's leprosy and how Jesus heals it is a parable for how Jesus deals with our sin.

Sin, like leprosy, is a disease, except unlike leprosy it infects every one of us. ***And Jesus never ignored sin in the name of compassion.*** We see this most clearly in the account of the woman caught in adultery, from John 8. If you know the story, the religious leaders of the day bring Jesus this woman and test Jesus with her, asking him, "Moses taught that we should stone adulteresses. What do you say?" Jesus replied, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." None of these men were willing to do so, and they all walked away. Then we read this in John 8:10-11: "Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"<sup>11</sup> She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

Jesus didn't say, "Neither do I condemn you, because adultery isn't a big deal and you've had a hard life. We need to disregard that part of God's law." He said, "Go, and sin no more."

Jesus never backed down when it came to sin, and any kind of compassion that deliberately ignores sin is not true compassion. ***It's pseudo-compassion.***

Why? **Because sin is contagious.** The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians compares sin to yeast, and writes, "Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?<sup>7</sup> Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are." 1 Corinthians 5:6-7 (NIV 1984). When you refuse to clearly name what is sin in your life, you threaten to contaminate everyone in the worshipping community around you.

**And because sin is destructive.** In whatever form it takes in our lives, sin causes us to live less like people who bear the image of God, people who are the pinnacle of God's creation who have

been given stewardship over all the world. Instead, sin dehumanizes us. Sin brutalizes us. Ultimately, sin leads us away from God and into hell.

Rosaria Butterfield, once a professor at Syracuse University and active in the gay community there, who later was converted, became a Christian, and is now married to a pastor. A few years ago, in response to the kinds of arguments we just heard out of the convention in St. Louis, she wrote this, “If this were 1999—the year that I was converted and walked away from the woman and lesbian community I loved—instead of 2016, [the arguments I’m hearing from so many for] the holiness of LGBT relationships would have flooded into my world like a balm of Gilead. How amazing it would have been to have ... radiant, knowledgeable, humble, [and] kind ... [Christians] saying out loud what my heart was shouting: Yes, I can have Jesus and my girlfriend. Yes, I can flourish both in my tenured academic discipline (queer theory and English literature and culture) and in my church. My emotional vertigo could find normal once again.

“Maybe I wouldn’t need to lose everything to have Jesus. Maybe the gospel wouldn’t ruin me while I waited, waited, waited for the Lord to build me back up after he convicted me of my sin, and I suffered the consequences. Maybe it would go differently for me than it did for Paul, Daniel, David, and Jeremiah. Maybe Jesus could save me without afflicting me. Maybe the Lord would give to me respectable crosses [and m]anageable thorns.

“Today, I hear [these arguments — arguments] meant to encourage, not discourage, to build up, not tear down, to defend the marginalized, not broker unearned power—and a thin trickle of sweat creeps down my back. If I were still in the thick of the battle over the indwelling sin of lesbian desire, [these arguments] would have put a millstone around my neck ... I learned through conversion that when something feels right and good and real and necessary—but stands against God’s Word—this reveals the particular way Adam’s sin marks my life. Our sin natures deceive us. Sin’s deception isn’t just ‘out there’; it’s also deep in the caverns of our hearts.

“How I feel does not tell me who I am. Only God can tell me who I am, because he made me and takes care of me. He tells me that we are all born as male and female image bearers with souls that will last forever and gendered bodies that will either suffer eternally in hell or be glorified in the New Jerusalem. Genesis 1:27 tells me that there are ethical consequences and boundaries to being born male and female. When I say this previous sentence on college campuses ... the student protestors come out in the dozens. I’m told that declaring the ethical responsibilities of being born male and female is now hate speech.

“[But c]alling God’s sexual ethic hate speech does Satan’s bidding. This is Orwellian nonsense or worse. I only know who I really am when the Bible becomes my lens for self-reflection ...”

I think it’s fair, since I mentioned the struggles of certain professing Christians in another denomination, that now I mention our own. We are a Southern Baptist church, and if you’ve read the news in the last few weeks then you know that the *Houston Chronicle* reported that over the last twenty years 380 Southern Baptist church leaders have either been convicted, credibly accused and successfully sued, or confessed to and resigned because of instances of sexual abuse. These men left behind over 700 victims, and incredibly some of those perpetrators *were still working in Southern Baptist churches when the article ran in the paper!*

You read that and you wonder, “How in the world, in this day and age with background checks and when people are supposed to follow up with references, does something like that happen?” I’ll tell you how it happens.

God’s Word is very clear about what to do when someone in authority in a church commits this kind of gross sin. “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.” 1 Timothy 5:20. In other words, when an accusation against a pastor is clear and convincing, shout it from the rooftops.

But all too often when an influential person in the church is credibly accused of abuse it’s all swept under the rug. People start to think, “It will be too divisive” or “the church just can’t handle this kind of scandal,” or “it’s a he-said, she-said; who can be sure?” And they allow the accused to resign quietly, move on to another town, and do it all over again.

The worst is when people say, “You know, we believe in forgiveness, we believe in second chances, because that’s what Jesus would do,” and use that as an excuse to fail to investigate claims of abuse and report them to the authorities. You know what that is? *It is an attempt to show compassion by disregarding God’s law, which is no kind of compassion at all.*

When you do that you’re telling people sin is okay. But that’s like telling someone metastatic pancreatic cancer is ok. It’s not. Jesus knew that, so he never failed to call sin “sin.”

The priests didn’t touch lepers because all it would have done is spread the uncleanness throughout the community. They couldn’t heal. Their duty was to maintain God’s standards of cleanliness, diagnose the leprosy, and in the part of the job I’m sure they dreaded doing, send the lepers away from the camp. Let’s be clear: in touching the man, Jesus was not condemning the priests.

But having said all that, we still haven’t answered the question: why *did* Jesus touch the man with leprosy?

Second, the power of Jesus alone to heal. According to the law of God, Jesus, after touching the man with leprosy, in his humanity he would be unclean himself and must go to the priests and through all the procedures and isolation and waiting period to get clean again. But Jesus doesn’t do any of that.

How can he touch leprosy without spreading the contagion further? Here’s what Jesus is saying by refusing to go himself to the priest: “The priests can only declare a person unclean. ***But I am cleanliness itself.*** I am the ***fulfillment*** of the clean laws in the Old Testament. I don’t have to go into isolation when I heal a leper because these laws were put in place to point people to me and the cleanliness God sent me to bring.”

Jesus says, “I have nothing against the Aaronic priesthood. They are doing their jobs when they pronounce lepers unclean. **But one greater than Aaron is here.** I am the priest to end all priests. I’m not here to tell you what you need to do to make yourself right with God. I’m not

here to tell you how to be fit to live in the worshiping community. I am cleanliness and I am fitness. Through me, anyone come into the presence of God.”

Jesus is saying: “I don’t care who you are. I don’t care what you’ve done. I don’t care what has been done to you. If you belong to me, then you are clean. It is as if you never had leprosy. It is as if you’ve never sinned. It doesn’t matter how stained and broken you are.” Now how can Jesus do that?

Hebrews 13:11-14 tells us: “For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. <sup>12</sup> So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. <sup>13</sup> Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. <sup>14</sup> For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”

Do you hear what the author of Hebrews is saying? The man’s leprosy didn’t disappear into thin air when Jesus healed him. It had to land somewhere. When he takes our sins from off of us, they have to land somewhere. Ultimately, Hebrews says, they all land on Jesus. Just as the unclean people in Israel had to go outside the camp, Jesus had to be crucified outside the gates of the city of Jerusalem. But because he was the perfect, sinless son of God, we can be sure that when Jesus died he wasn’t dying for his uncleanness. We can be sure he died for ours. Galatians 3:13 says, “<sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” That’s the good news of Christianity. Jesus took all our sins, infirmities, and diseases on himself.

**What must you do to get this healing, this connection with Jesus, in your life?** First, *it takes desperation*. The man with leprosy risked his life to get to Jesus. We read this occurred in “one of the cities” of Galilee. The man had to run past a bunch of people to get to Jesus. There was a good chance they would beaten him to death. He wasn’t supposed to be there.

But you know what he’s thinking: “What do I have to lose? Maybe being killed would be better than this living death I’m in now. All I know is I’ve got to get to Jesus.”

My prayer is this church would be full of desperate people. People who know their sins, left untreated, mean a living death, and are willing to do whatever it takes to get to Jesus.

*Second, it takes surrender*. The man said to Jesus, “If you are willing you can make me clean.” He did not demand anything of Jesus. He certainly not making terms with Jesus or negotiating. He’s not saying, “Jesus, please cleanse me but don’t command me. Don’t tell me what sin is.” No, the man unconditionally offers himself to Jesus and says, “Do whatever you will.”

*Third, it takes faith in the promises*. When Jesus said, “Be clean,” the man believed. He trusted Jesus to do it.

I’ve met many people over the years who are desperate, are ready to surrender, but they just can’t quite believe the promises of Jesus are for them. They think it’s too good to be true. They still feel like they’ve got to clean themselves up before Jesus can accept them. *Nothing could be*

*further from the truth.* You don't have to change at all to come to Jesus. Just go to him, acknowledging your sin. If you do, Jesus will take care of the rest.

**What can we do as a church to make it easier for people to come to Jesus?** We have to love them. It is so incredibly hard to acknowledge your sin and come to Jesus, especially when you live in a culture that screams at you to glory in your sin and says you owe it to everyone else to be true to what you feel. It's so hard.

So we must help them. We have to represent Jesus to them accurately. That means being loving, patient, affectionate, opening our homes, learning about others. It means when we are reviled, we do not revile in return. It's incredibly hard to love someone while simultaneously telling them some of the strongest feelings they have about themselves are, in fact, lies from the devil.

***But that's what Jesus did, and that is what we are called to do.*** The more we see we've been forgiven of our most cherished sins, the more able we will be to uphold the law which points out sin while accepting all around us. As we've already sung this morning, "When Satan tempts me to despair, and tells me of my guilt within, upward I look and see him there, who made an end of all my sin." PRAY