

## **I Need a Miracle, part 3 – “Leper Healed”**

*Scripture: Luke 5:12-16*

Would you please join me in prayer? Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, thank you for what you do in our lives every day. We turn to you in these moments now, and ask that you speak to us once more your message of eternal life. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, my Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever worn gloves to protect your hands? I often watched my father don gloves as he prepped for surgery in his veterinary office. It was extremely important that everything be sterile. It was literally a matter of life and death. I learned how to put on and take off gloves, clean and sterilize scalpels and syringes in the autoclave - essentially a furnace for sterilizing all the equipment. All of the tools would be wrapped in packages, and when you prepared for surgery, you had to open those packages just right. The biggest challenge was to remember what was clean and unclean. You have probably seen doctors in movies, holding their hands like this (away from the body), and after surgery, taking off the gloves just so. They are not even allowed to touch the outside of the gloves after surgery, because they are contaminated.

Gloves allow you touch something you consider dirty or infected. You have probably worn them while you worked in the garden, cleaned the house, or painted something. I'll bet you washed your hands when you were done. These concepts of separation and cleanliness help us understand today's scripture.

Luke tells us that a man with leprosy approaches Jesus for healing. Now, leprosy in the Bible is not the same as “Hansen's disease”, which we commonly call leprosy today. Hansen's disease is a condition when your nerve endings go

bad and your skin turns white. It is extremely contagious. However, in the Bible, leprosy could be any number of skin diseases. Any skin discoloration could be identified as leprosy by the priest. There is an entire chapter in Leviticus dedicated to leprosy, if you want to read some really gross stuff.

Leprosy is a physical illness with a potent social stigma. Leprosy isolated you from society. Listen to the rules from Leviticus (13:45-46) for those declared to be lepers: “Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.”

Those are pretty hard rules. Sadly, there were no rubber gloves and surgical gowns back then. The fear of contamination was very strong. One bible commentary puts it this way: “Into every culture sooner or later come diseases so mysterious and so threatening that they are met primarily with fear and ignorance.” (Craddock, IBC, 71) Leprosy is such a disease.

So this leper is contagious, and he is isolated from society. Furthermore, he breaks the rules by approaching Jesus. He gets “too close.”

We all know what it is like when someone invades your personal space. You take a step back. When I was little, my godmother would always kiss my cheek at family reunions. She would laugh and tell me, “You’re so handsome,” and then smear red lipstick on my face. It was so embarrassing.

But think about it. Touch communicates many things, especially affection. When our loved ones are ill, we reach for their hands. When a child needs to calm down and be reassured, they take your hand. I can still remember the first time I held hands with Katja (my wife). Touch is stronger than words. It

communicates love, presence, and compassion.

The leper never had any of those opportunities. He is alone and ostracized. He is repulsive. He has no opportunity to receive compassion. No one can touch him. And as he invades Jesus' personal space, Jesus certainly knows all of this. The man falls with his face to the ground at Jesus' feet and begs, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." (Luke 5:12)

How does Jesus respond? Does Jesus take a step back? Does he squirm at the man's hideous condition? No. Jesus says, "I am willing. Be clean." And he touches the leper. Grace is literally extended to this man in the form of Jesus' unprotected hand. Think about what this really means. Jesus does not just physically touch him; Jesus enters his world. The Levitical regulations say that if you touch someone unclean, you yourself become unclean. By law, when Jesus touches the man, Jesus should be infected, causing himself to be isolated. But the miracle is, when Jesus touches the leper, the leper is healed. Jesus is not contaminated. In fact, the opposite happens. Jesus' purity is imparted to the leper. The "untouchable" leper is healed with a touch of compassion and empathy – the miraculous touch of Jesus.

For a short passage, this scripture has a lot to say to us today. I submit to you that our world is full of "untouchables". If you know your history, you know that in the 1930's, Mahatma Gandhi led a crusade against the caste system in India. Gandhi believed that no one should be ostracized or ignored; he believed that no one was untouchable.

But sadly that separation continues today, literally and figuratively. Many of us insulate and isolate ourselves. We put our hands in gloves. Our hearts grow cold. If someone does not look like us, think like us, or smell like us, we tend to

put distance between them and us. And we withdraw to the caves of self-centeredness, depression, and loneliness. Our hearts become hard with spiritual scars. We become insensitive. We don't just don gloves; we wear whole "haz-mat" suits over our lives.

Do you know the movie E.T.? This picture is the iconic image of the boy, Elliot, touching E.T.'s hand. The tip of E.T.'s finger glows, representing something exchanged. In the movie, Elliot's life becomes linked with E.T.'s. The image is powerfully contrasted later in the movie, as scientists surround E.T. and Elliot wearing contamination suits, isolating them E.T. and Elliot.

That is what it is like for many people. They figuratively live in protective suits. They are isolated, ignored, forgotten, and feel unloved. And they long for someone to reach out and touch them.

I find it interesting that in ET, healing occurs with a touch. Even dead things are brought back to life, like a chrysanthemum. Unintentionally, Steven Spielberg tapped into a story as old as the Bible. Resurrection is always a sign of God at work, and in many instances, it happens with a touch. Besides Jesus, Elijah, Elisha, Peter and Paul all performed miracles that including touching the hand or body of a person who was dead. (*J. L. Meredith, Meredith's Big Book of Bible Lists, (Inspirational Press, NY; 1980), p. 115*)

God has always known that we need to be touched to be healed. That is why he sent his own Son in to the world. Jesus is the incarnation of God – literally, God with flesh wrapped around him. God with human hands and no gloves. When God became flesh, he could touch our bodies, our hearts, and our lives. When Jesus touches us, he does not become contaminated with our sin. The opposite happens. We get healed, restored, and brought back to the

community of God. Our sinful lives are cleaned. Jesus imparts his righteousness to us. It is a miracle.

In the scripture, Jesus told the now-healed leper to go and show himself to the priest. His miracle was meant to be made public. The man would let himself be examined, allowing the priest to touch his new skin.

Likewise, touching is an integral part of holy communion. After we confess our sin and our brokenness, we receive forgiveness and then pass the peace. We have an opportunity to touch each other – using signs of grace, love, and compassion. Hand touches hand. People are restored to the community.

We also have to touch the bread to receive it. The usher puts the bread in your hand. In doing so, it is the bread that touches us. The body of Christ touches us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' righteousness enters our hearts, and our fractured lives are "remembered" – put back together, brought back into communion with God. Our relationship is restored. God sees you. You are not untouchable; you are a beloved child of God.

Our mission is to take what we have received and touch others. Touch their hearts. Touch their lives. Show them the compassion, mercy, and grace that God has for them. This is what the church has done for 2,000 years, and we continue to be a part of that mission today. God touches the world, through our very hands. So celebrate and give God glory. He has noticed us. He has touched us. He has redeemed us. And he calls us to go and touch the world. Amen.

Memory Verse: **Luke 5:13**

"Reaching out His hand, He touched him, saying, 'I am willing; be made clean,' and immediately the disease left him."

Reflection Questions:

1. How do you feel when people touch you? Does that communicate peace and compassion, or other emotions?
2. What healing have you experienced in your life?
3. How has God touched your life? What has Jesus done to make you whole?
4. What people are ostracized in your community? How can you be Christ's hands and feet to them?