

I Am Willing
Matthew 8:1-4

Today, like the leper, we come to Jesus, for we approach the Lord's Table. Like the leper, we come to be cleansed, to be made whole. At least, that's what we say. But as we look at this passage, can we really say that we stand beside this leper? Do we really know what he knows?

For remember, this leper is acutely aware of his uncleanness. That's the word that's used in this passage – not sickness, but uncleanness.

Now, leprosy was indeed a sickness. It was the worst of the diseases discussed in the Bible. It is described as an affliction of the skin, resulting in white, scaly swellings in different places on the body. Although the Bible is quite clear in describing the symptoms of leprosy, there was no cure prescribed. The cure of a leper was considered to be a miracle of God.

Now, the horror of an incurable disease is bad enough. But the way lepers were treated made their condition much worse. For anyone whom the priests certified as having a case of leprosy was not to be cared for, but to be cut off from the community. The Scripture said: "He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp."

Why would a sick person be ostracized in such a way? In these days of COVID, our minds immediately jump to the problem of contagion, but, again, the Old Testament describes the disease not as "sickness" but as "uncleanness:" "He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean," says Leviticus.

And so, the leper was cut off from being in the presence of God's people, and he was cut off from going into the Temple, into the presence of God, not because he was contagious, but because he was unfit to be in the presence of anything holy and pure. That was how this leper looked at himself: he knew he was defiled, he knew he was unworthy.

So, how about us? As we come to Jesus today, do we really have a sense of our uncleanness? For if leprosy is uncleanness of the body, then sin is uncleanness of the soul. And sin wreaks the same devastating effects on the society and on the soul that leprosy wreaks on the body.

Now, we've all experienced how COVID has kept us apart from our loved ones, even during this holiday season. But doesn't sin also separate us from other people? Think about it: when you hold a grudge against someone, when you are angry with someone, what happens to the distance between you and that other person? When you refuse to forgive someone because he has hurt you, what happens to the distance between you and him? You may be standing in the same room, or sitting in the same pew,

but you might as well be in another county, or even in another country. Sin splinters and divides the people of God just as surely as COVID or even leprosy ever did.

More seriously, sin separates us from God Himself. Just as leprosy kept a man out of the temple, so sin keeps a man far away from God. For sin, at its root, is really nothing less than turning our backs on God, despising His commandments, denying His authority, rejecting His love. Sin says, "I will make my own rules. I will look to myself or my idols for guidance. I don't need you, God. I don't love you." In short, sin slams the door of the heart in the face of God.

In many ways, then, this leper might be in better shape than are we. For he can't kid himself about his uncleanness – all he has to do is look in the mirror. He feels his separation from God and others every day in so many ways. But we, well we so easily turn a blind eye to certain sins in our lives, don't we? We easily ignore our uncleanness, as we distract ourselves with our business or our amusements. Oh yes, unlike this leper, we often deceive ourselves, imagining our relationship with God to be healthy, even while we deny God's authority over us, even while we turn our attention away from God to focus on ourselves – our concerns and our desires.

But even if we have come to conviction of our sins, do we really stand with this leper? For he is not only aware of his uncleanness. He is also aware of his helplessness. He knows that there is no cure for his disease. He knows that there is nothing he can do to make himself clean. And so he comes to Jesus. He bows down to Him. He thus admits not only his uncleanness, but his weakness.

How about us independent, pick-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstrap Americans? Are we willing to admit that there is absolutely nothing we can do to cleanse ourselves of sin? Do we really kneel with the leper, helpless at the feet of Jesus?

Or do we congratulate ourselves for our good works? Do we take pride in our church membership or in the regularity of our worship attendance or in the generosity of our giving? Do we catch ourselves looking down on others because our sins are not so spectacular or so socially unacceptable as theirs? No, if we are trusting in ourselves or in our own righteousness, we have no business coming to this table, for we aren't really coming to Jesus.

But if we stand with the leper, aware of our sinful uncleanness, aware of our helplessness, and crying out to Christ alone to save us, then we can come with confidence. We can fall at His feet and know that He will hear our prayers.

But there is one other thing we can learn from the leper. Just as we must admit our uncleanness and our helplessness, we must acknowledge Jesus' authority over us. Just as we claim Christ as Savior, we must submit ourselves completely to Him as our Lord.

How do we learn this from the leper? Notice that he worshipped Jesus, bowing down to Him – this is the posture of submission. Moreover, we notice that he makes no demands on Jesus. He doesn't even dare to request healing. He simply affirms his faith in the power of Christ. He simply states the fact that Jesus has authority over even incurable diseases. He thus allows Jesus to do with him whatever Jesus wants.

What about us? Are we doing the same thing? Are we placing ourselves, all that we are and all that we have in the hands of Jesus? Or do we put conditions on our allegiance to Jesus? Do we say that we will follow Him, but only if he does certain things for us?

The leper, at least according to his words, would have been satisfied if Jesus had decided not to heal him. What about us? Would we follow Jesus if He did not give us what we want? Would we follow Jesus if He led us into pain and suffering? How about if He allowed us to experience poverty? Would we follow Him if He allowed us to come down with the virus? What if He allowed our loved ones to get sick, or even die? Would we turn away from Jesus in bitterness? Or would we still kneel at His feet, confessing His power and might?

Yes, this leper shows us the way that we must come to Jesus. We must bring with us no illusions of our competence or our cleanliness or our rights or our privileges. We must come with emptiness in our hands, confession on our lips, and humility in our hearts. To come to Jesus, to come to His table, we must come like the leper.

But the good news is that we come to the same Jesus to whom the leper came. We come to the same Jesus, the One who is willing and able to cleanse us.

Yes, Jesus was willing to help this leper. In fact, Jesus went so far as to reach out His hand and touch him. Now in these days of COVID, with our masks and our 6 feet of distance designed to prevent the spread of contagion, we understand just how dangerous such a touch can be. For in those days, anyone who touched a leper would have been considered just as unclean, just as defiled, just as much of an outcast as the one who was sick.

But Jesus' touch was so much more than an expression of compassion for this leper's suffering and isolation. For His touch not only demonstrated His willingness to help, but also His ability to save. With

His touch came not only cleansing, but the promise of restoration to society and to worship. The touch of Jesus restored this man to full communion with God and with human society.

And isn't that really the same thing Jesus did for all His people on the cross? For there, Jesus not only risked being contaminated with human infection – He took on Himself all the sin, all the uncleanness of all His people. And by pouring out His lifeblood for us, Jesus not only transmits His own perfect holiness to all who would trust Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord – He restores us to perfect fellowship with the Father, giving us eternal life, and promising us that we will live in the presence of God forever.

Yes, because of His great love, and at the cost of His own life, Jesus reaches across the chasm of our sin. Jesus touches His unclean, helpless people. And as He touches us, we are clean.

Who can explain such willing love? Who can understand such powerful ability? But this is the promise of Christ – He is willing and able to cleanse even the most helpless of sinners. So, come, trust in Him. Come, bow down before Him. Come and be clean.