

## Encounters with Jesus in Matthew: The Leper

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

January 15, 2023 AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Matthew 8:1-4

Today's encounter with Jesus is a miracle story. It's Jesus encounter with a Leper in Matthew 8:1-4. And though it's a short passage it's at a really important point in the gospel. Jesus has called his disciples, he's just laid out his vision for discipleship in the sermon on the mount, and now having been called and taught, the disciples are getting the very first picture of his ministry in action. They won't just hear about discipleship in theory, they will see it in action. And they will learn a lot about discipleship by watching the master at work. The same is true for us. That's how all disciples learn right? We learn by watching the master. So let's watch the master in action. Let's watch him as he does this miracle. Because as we watch him, I think we will learn something about the who of the discipleship, the what of the discipleship and the how of discipleship. So three points today: what this story tells us about the who of discipleship, the what of discipleship and the how of discipleship. Read Matthew 8:1-4

Jesus has just finished the Sermon on the Mount, this powerful sermon which, as you probably know, sets high standards for Christian discipleship. That sermon has high standards for forgiveness, for financial giving, for prayer, for faithfulness, for integrity. It includes the lines: 'be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,' and 'unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.' It makes discipleship seem like a high mountain.

But now as Jesus comes down the mountain, the first person he meets is a leper. A man covered in an obvious skin disease, a man wearing tattered clothes, a man covered in lesions, a man who was a flaking, oozing mess. If the sermon on the mount is a high mountain of holiness, this man is as far down in the pit of misery as you can get. The leper falls on his knees before Jesus and says, "Lord if you are willing you can make me clean!" This was not what the man was supposed to cry. Frankly, according to the Old Testament law, this man probably shouldn't have been here at all. Leviticus 13 has very clear instructions for men and women with skin diseases like leprosy. Because they were physically and spiritually unclean, they were supposed to keep their hair unkempt, they were supposed to wear torn clothes, and they were supposed to shout "Unclean! Unclean!" wherever they went. They were supposed to live alone, away from family, away from friends, outside the camp. Lepers were a living embodiment of uncleanness. Especially after this high and holy sermon, I'm sure many of the people in the crowd expected Jesus to say to the leper something like, "What are you doing here?! People like you aren't supposed to be here! This is no place for people like you!"

But Jesus doesn't do that. He has compassion on him and heals him. And this sets up a really interesting contrast. Jesus preaches this sermon of high holiness, and the first person he reaches out to after the sermon is this person who is about as far from a picture of holiness as you could imagine. In fact, if you look at the people Jesus heals and interacts with right after the sermon you get a really interesting group of folk. In chapters 8 and 9, here are the people Jesus heals. Here are the people upon whom Jesus pours out grace and healing in these chapters: An outcast leper, a powerful gentile centurion, an older Jewish woman (Peter's mother in law), a demon possessed beggar, a 12-year-old girl – the daughter of the synagogue leader, and a tax collector.

Picture that group! The ragged leper, a gentile centurion, a twelve-year-old Jewish girl, a tax collector, a sixty-year-old Jewish woman, a beggar who had been possessed by a demon. What an unusual gathering of people! Can you imagine people less likely to hang out? Can you imagine 7 people less likely to be associated with each other? There are powerful and weak, there are young and old, there are Jews and Gentiles, there are male and female. Under normal circumstances, these 7 people would never associate with each other. The only thing bringing this group together is Jesus. Only Jesus could bring these people into association.

That unusual variety of people whom Jesus touches and pours out his grace is no accident; it's a sign. It's a foreshadowing of the kind of community Jesus will be creating through his ministry, through his death and his resurrection and through the outpouring of the Spirit. It tells us about the who of discipleship. Who does Jesus call to follow him? Everyone. The path may be narrow and the call may be high, but absolutely everyone

is invited to walk with this man, and to join the circle of his community. If you join him he will change you, he will do that heavy renovation work that I talked about last week, and it will be painful, but that journey begins with his moving toward you as you are, in your mess. Jesus comes in love, lays his hands on you and says, 'I am willing to make you clean.' 'I want you, yes you, even you, to be a part of my family.'

So this story shows us that the who of discipleship is everyone. It also tells us something about the what of discipleship. Without sounding over-dramatic, there is something revolutionary happening in this miracle, something that signals a change in what discipleship will look like. That revolution reveals itself in the moment that Jesus reaches out to touch the leper. That's a critical detail in this miracle, one that Matthew wants you to see. Verse 3: "Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man." Why did Jesus do that? Did Jesus need to touch the man? Couldn't Jesus just say "You are healed!" Couldn't he heal with a word? He does that other places. He just tells demons to "Get out of that man," and they do. He commands the winds and the waves to "be still" and they are calmed. But here, Jesus reaches out and touches the man. Without sounding over-dramatic, this touch reveals a shift in the cosmic battle between light and darkness. This touch signals a change in the balance of cosmic power.

How so? We've already talked about how lepers were supposed to remove themselves from polite society, how they were supposed to wear rags and walk around saying, "Unclean! Unclean!" In the Old Testament, what would happen if a regular person would touch a leper? They would become unclean. The leper was unclean and unholy. If you touched them, you would be contaminated by them. You would have to remove yourself from community, you'd have to undergo a ritual washing because the evil had infected you. In the Old testament law, it wasn't just lepers that could contaminate you. You became unclean if you touched a dead body, if you came into contact with blood or other bodily fluids, if you ate certain foods. The overall ethos was, goodness and holiness is delicate and needs protection. Evil is terribly strong and you need to keep yourself safe.

But now when Jesus reaches out to touch the man what happens? Does Jesus get contaminated? No. The uncleanliness of the leper has no power to infect Jesus. In fact, the contamination goes the other direction! Jesus infects the leper with cleanliness, Jesus contaminates the leper with holiness. Jesus touches the leper and now this leper who used to be cut off from God's people can now go to the temple and show himself to a priest. It's a revolution! The balance of power is shifting.

Which shouldn't surprise us because something incredible has happened. The living God has become human. In Christ, the eternal God has come to earth. And guess what! When God comes down to earth, things change. Jesus has come to destroy evil. Because He is here, as it says in the gospel of Luke, Satan will fall like lightning from heaven. As Revelation 12 says, when Mary has her baby, Michael and all the angels of light go to war against the dragon and he is defeated and cast down. Right now, in this touch, Jesus is signaling what will happen more finally and completely in his death and resurrection and ascension: the devil will be defeated, the ancient powers of evil will be in confusion and retreat and Christ will reign over the earth. So of course his touch contaminates the darkness with light.

This changes the ethos of our discipleship. Is Satan still dangerous in this world? Yes, he's dangerous like any mortally wounded wild animal is dangerous. Do we still have to be careful about evil's power to hurt us? Yes, we have to be careful and we have to be wise, but we do not have to be afraid!! Not anymore. In the power of Jesus, we don't have to be afraid of the brokenness of the world. I know sometimes it feels like the walls are closing in. I know it sometimes feels as though the darkness is deepening. I know the trouble in your life seems overwhelming and the faith and hope that you carry around seems a small and fragile thing. Do not be afraid. Your faith may be small, your hope may be fragile, but the power of Jesus is in you. The flame of your small light is powered by the Light of the world. You can go out into your world and reach out push against the darkness with your little bit of light, and the darkness will give way, because He who is in us is stronger than he who is in the world.

Which brings me to the last point. We've seen the who of discipleship – everyone. We've seen the what of discipleship – a change in the balance of cosmic power because Jesus has come. Finally, this miracle tells us something about the how of discipleship, how we can go out in confidence against the world's evil.

Here's something I noticed about Jesus' healing of the Leper that I've never noticed before. The healing has two dimensions, two parts. Let me explain. The leper comes to Jesus and he says, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Can you feel the pain in the 'If you are willing' part of that statement? I think when you were a leper in that culture, when you've spent your whole life calling yourself unclean, when you've spent your whole life having people avoid you, you probably think of yourself as worthless. Unlovable. Invisible. This leper would have lived in a constant state of shame and loneliness. "Am I worth someone's time and attention? I'm not sure." The leper's question is sincere. "Jesus, please, I'm so sorry to bother you, but are you willing to spare a second for someone like me?"

What's the very first thing Jesus does when the leper asks the question? Notice: he doesn't start with the physical healing. He doesn't start with taking away the leper's external sickness, the sores, the lesions. Before he does anything to heal the disease, he reaches out and touches the leper and says, "I am willing." What is Jesus aiming at with that touch and those words? He's aiming at the leper's shame and unworthiness. He's aiming at the leper's soul! "My friend, I see you. I came for people like you. I love you and I am willing to heal you." There are two dimensions of healing to this miracle. With his touch and his words Jesus heals the man's shame and brokenness; and then with the command, Jesus takes care of the leprosy.

It reminds me of the healing of the paralytic. Remember that when the paralyzed man is brought to Jesus, Jesus doesn't start by telling him to pick up his bed and walk. What's the first thing he says to the man? "Your sins are forgiven." He heals all the dimensions of the man. So the healing that Jesus performs when he heals the leprosy is wonderful, but equally wonderful and maybe even more moving is the moment when Jesus touches the man and says, "I am willing. I see you. I love you."

I was thinking about these two dimensions of the miracle, and it struck me that this has something to teach us about the how of discipleship. I am often frustrated that I don't have more power to work the kinds of physical healing miracles that Jesus does in the gospels. I wish I could command cancer to disappear. I wish I could put my hand on someone's shoulder and make the spirit of depression leave them forever, or make their chronic pain go away. I don't seem to have that power. And I'll bet most of you don't either. But that other part of Jesus miracle, we can all do that. We can all embrace the person who is in pain, and let them know that they are seen and loved and prayed for. That's pretty important. I don't have the words or the program to help a struggling neighbor get over their stuff, but I can see them and talk with them and let them know they matter. I can't make the pain go away for my friend who is distraught over the death of their loved one, I can't find magic words that will make her sadness disappear, but I can sit with her and let her know I'm there and I care. I can't wave a magic wand and make all the fear and anger of society go away, but I can go out every day and absorb a little of the anger and the fear, and return it with love and hope and grace and gospel.

These may seem like small things, but they are not. It was not a small thing that Jesus saw the leper and touched him. It's not a small thing for you to reach out against the darkness with your little bit of love. The power of God is in your little thing. The power of the resurrection is in your little bit of love. So don't be afraid.

©Rev. Peter Jonker