

If you want to, you can heal me.

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

6th Sunday after Epiphany, Year B. February 12, 2006. (Text: Mark 1:40-45)

It's hard for us to imagine what it must have been like in Jesus' time for a person suffering from leprosy. In addition to the physical suffering caused by the disease, lepers had to live apart from everyone else. By law, they couldn't enter a town. They couldn't shop for food in the market place. And when they had a meal, they couldn't eat with anyone but other lepers. They weren't allowed to worship in the temple or a synagogue. As they walked along a road, if anyone else approached they had to cover their mouth with a hand and cry out, "*Unclean, unclean,*" so others would keep their distance.

According to the law, those who came in contact with a leper automatically contracted the leper's uncleanness, became contaminated, and so became outcasts too – until they went through a lengthy and expensive ritual cleansing.

Imagine this scene. We're with Jesus in the market place of Capernaum. His disciples are there too and other people are standing around, listening to Jesus talk. A ragged beggar comes to the edge of the crowd and begins to move toward Jesus. People turn, take one look at him, and leap back. Some even run away. We hear cries of "*Leper! Leper!*" and "*Unclean!*" Even the Disciples pull back – though Jesus stands his ground and doesn't move. The wretched man comes right up to Jesus and falls to his knees at his feet. White, scaly flesh and missing fingers define the beggar as a leper. There can be no doubt at all. The disease causes an unpleasant odor, and everyone can smell it – though now no one but Jesus is nearer the man than ten feet.

From his place of abasement in the dust, surrounded by people with looks of revulsion (and curiosity) on their faces, the beggar lifts his eyes to Jesus' face and says, "If you *want* to, you can make me clean." Clearly, he didn't question the *power* of Jesus to heal him. He believed that Jesus could do what he needed. He only questioned the *will* of Jesus to do such a thing. He says, "*If you want to...!*" This leper had probably never met Jesus. He may have known nothing about him except that he had a reputation for being able to cast out demons and heal the sick. So the man took the risk of coming to find him. —Maybe Jesus would be strict about the Law. He didn't know. Maybe he was a Pharisee. Maybe Jesus would be offended that an unclean person dared approach him. The leper couldn't have known what would happen. But he came, and he said to Jesus "*If you want to, you can make me clean.*"

We can imagine that Jesus looked down at the man and then around at the crowd – who were all keeping their distance, fearful of coming in contact with this filthy "untouchable." Then Jesus reached down and put his hand on the man's disfigured, dirty face and said, "*I do want to; be clean.*" Immediately the leper was healed, made clean.

Notice something here: Jesus, even if he wanted to help the leper, didn't have to *touch* him. He could have simply spoken a word, and the man would have been made well. He could have said, "I call on the Father to make you clean," or "It is God's will that you be clean."

To be effective, Jesus' healing power did not require physical contact. —But he *touched* this "untouchable" anyway. Coming in physical contact with a leper automatically contaminated Jesus. That was the law. The leper was cleansed, and now Jesus was *unclean*. —Or *was* he? Jesus didn't seem to think so. The crowd heard Jesus tell the cleansed leper to find a priest and perform the correct ritual to be certified as clean and be able to re-enter society, but Jesus made no move to go along with him and find a priest for himself. —Why? Because he didn't regard himself as contaminated. On the contrary, he had absorbed the man's leprosy into himself and had given his own health to the leper. Instead of both being diseased, now *both* were whole and pure. —This was evident to everyone who was watching.

Here at the very beginning of the gospel – we're still in Chapter One of Mark – we see Jesus revealing the essence of his entire mission. We have a prefigurement of the cross. He came to take our sins, our uncleanness, our alienation, our pain, our grief, our sorrow all on himself. He *chose* to. He said, "*I want to.*"

Who are our "lepers"? The actual disease may be disappearing, but we *do* have "lepers" of other sorts, don't we? And we don't want to touch them, either literally or figuratively. It's easy to make a short list of who fits that category:

- People living with AIDS are the most obvious "lepers" these days.

- People with disfiguring diseases or even physical blemishes, like obvious birthmarks say that some people won't even look at them.
- Homeless people, street people, "bag ladies," everyone whose clothing or manner is other than "mainstream," can find themselves isolated and treated as untouchable.
- Immigrants from Latin America, both legal residents and illegals alike, report feeling cut off from the rest of us. They say typical Anglos "keep their distance."

Michael Kirwan, who has spent years working with homeless people in Washington, D.C., told this story about the beginning of his ministry: One winter night he brought down a gallon jug of split pea soup from his apartment to a group of homeless men huddled on the sidewalk near his building. He'd done things like that before – bringing them food or blankets. He put the jug of soup down on a cinderblock near the heating vent where the street people had gathered for warmth.

Michael says that no sooner had he brought the soup and put it down than a rough-looking guy picked up the jar of soup and broke it over his head. Instead of running away from this madman, which he might ordinarily have done, Michael asked "Why did you do that to me?" It was the *first* time he had ever spoken to these people, though he had brought food to them before.

The man said Michael was doing nothing different from bringing food to animals. He told him that he brought food, set it down as if putting it in a pet dish, and walked away. The man said, "Why don't you stay and talk to us. Visit with us. We won't bite."

So Michael began visiting with them. He said, "A barrier had been broken down in my perception of who homeless people are. ...Those men and women on the street had feelings just like me. They wanted to be loved and respected and listened to. They were glad someone cared about them, but just giving them food and a blanket wasn't enough."

The leper said to Jesus, "*If you want to, you can make me clean.*" Jesus touched him and said, "*I do want to. Be clean.*"

Most of us are glad to give money to help worthy causes – to feed and heal and provide shelter for needy people. But God is inviting us to do more than simply give money. *The gospel is calling us to reach out and touch people.* Jesus had a "hands on" ministry to lepers. We're called to the same work.

Who, in our little world is an outcast? Who's desperate for the human contact of touch? ...Is it someone dying from a disfiguring illness, who desperately wants someone to sit by his bedside and hold his hand? ...Is it a lonely old person with no family still alive, just hoping that someone might visit and give her a hug? ...Is it a young person struggling with his sexual identity, who's hoping for someone who'll talk to him about his life, about how he feels, and not reject him?

The love Jesus offers is totally different from what the world offers. Jesus reaches out to touch us and make us whole, make us clean, give us a new beginning. He restores us to unity with God and one another. I'm glad we hold hands as we say the Lord's Prayer in this service. No one should be left out. We reach out and touch one another and draw together as those who have been touched and made clean by Jesus.

The leper who came to Jesus understood clearly that there would be no healing for him unless Jesus *wanted* to heal him. If we don't *want* to put ourselves into hands-on ministry, if we don't *want* to touch other lives, if we don't *want* to be the healing hands of Jesus among the social outcasts of our world, or among people who are unlovely or unlovable, then we will remain among those who merely *admire* Jesus, but can't be his *disciples*.

Someone needs *you* to touch them.

Someone needs *you* to listen to them.

Someone needs *you* to be with them.

If you *want* to, you can heal them.