

"His Healing Touch"

by Rev. Kathy Sides

(Preached at Fort Des Moines UMC 2-12-12)

Once Jesus began his ministry, it didn't take long before he began to draw large crowds. He did things that made people notice him, that made people begin to talk about him. "Did you hear about this fellow from Nazareth, this Jesus?? He's different from the rest. He goes into the synagogues and teaches with authority, not like those wishy-washy scribes do." "Did you hear what Jesus did in Capernaum? He went to Simon's home and healed his mother-in law. Why, by that evening half the town was there, bringing everyone who was sick or possessed with demons. And Jesus cured the sick. He *cured* them. And he cast demons out of people. I've never seen anything like it. I've never seen anything like this Jesus."

There was no evening news or morning newspaper, no telephones or E-mail, but word got around about Jesus. And people began to seek out Jesus. I suppose a good share of them did so out of curiosity. They just wanted to see this man people were talking about for themselves, see if he was really all they said he was. Maybe get in on a little excitement, be able to say, "Yeah, I've seen him, why, I even saw him heal a man." But there were others whose desire to see Jesus, to get near him, was based on much more than curiosity. Need and hope drew them to Jesus. Need for healing, hope that Jesus would reach out his hand to them and touch them. Touch them and make them whole.

Such was the case of the leper in today's Gospel lesson. He wasn't curious, he was desperate. Desperate to be made clean and whole. Desperate to be touched with the healing touch of Jesus. Over and over in the gospels we have people who come and kneel before Jesus, placing their hopes and their lives before him. They appear before Jesus and then a moment later they are gone. We don't know much about them. We aren't told the details of their lives, their heartaches, their hopes. We just hear of their brief encounter with Jesus. But in that brief encounter their lives are changed forever. Kneeling before Jesus their lives are changed.

It was so for the unnamed leper who knelt before Jesus and was touched and healed. We don't really know his story. But knowing something of the customs and practices of Jesus' time, we can begin to imagine what his story might have been. What his feelings might have been as he knelt before Jesus, longing for his healing touch. In the book, "Just Like Jesus", Max Lucado imagines what that leper's story might be. I think he does such a wonderful job of making the leper real for us, giving us a glimpse of his life, his heart. If that leper were here, he might tell us something like this:

For five years no one touched me. No one. Not one person. Not my wife. Not my child. Not my friends. No one touched me. They saw me. They spoke to me. I sensed love in their voices. I saw concern in their eyes. But I didn't feel their touch. There was no touch. Not once. No one touched me.

What is common to you, I coveted. Handshakes. Warm embraces. A tap on the shoulder to get my attention. A kiss on the lips to steal a heart. Such moments were taken from my world. No one touched me. No one bumped into me. What I would have given to be bumped into, to be caught in a crowd, for my shoulder to brush against another's. But for five years it has not happened. How could it? I was not allowed on the streets. Even the rabbis kept their distance from me. I was not permitted in my synagogue. Not even welcome in my own house.

I was untouchable. I was a leper. And no one touched me. Until today.

One year during harvest my grip on the scythe seemed weak. The tips of my fingers numbed. First one finger than another. Within a short time I could grip the tool but scarcely feel it. By the end of the season, I felt nothing at all. The hand grasping the handle might as well have belonged to someone else – the feeling was gone. I said nothing to my wife, but I know she suspected something. How could she not? I carried my hand against my body like a wounded bird.

One afternoon I plunged my hands into a basin of water intending to wash my face. The water reddened. My finger was bleeding, bleeding freely. I didn't even know I was wounded. How did I cut myself? On a knife? Did my hand slide across the sharp edge of metal? I must have, but I didn't feel anything.

It's on your clothes, too," my wife said softly. She was behind me. Before looking at her, I looked down at the crimson spots on my robe. For the longest time I stood over the basin, staring at my hand. Somehow I knew my life was being forever altered.

"Shall I go with you to tell the priest?" she asked. "No," I sighed, "I'll go alone."

I turned and looked into her moist eyes. Standing next to her was our three-year-old daughter. Squatting, I gazed into her face and stroked her cheek, saying nothing. What could I say? I stood and looked again at my wife. She touched my shoulder, and with my good hand, I touched hers. It would be our final touch.

Five years have passed, and no one has touched me since, until today. The priest didn't touch me. He looked at my hand, now wrapped in a rag. He looked at my face, now shadowed in sorrow. I've never faulted him for what he said. He was only doing as he was instructed. He covered his mouth and extended his hand, palm forward, "you are unclean," he told me. With one pronouncement I lost my family, my farm, my future, my friends.

My wife met me at the city gates with a sack of clothing and bread and coins. She didn't speak. By now friends had gathered. What I saw in their eyes was a precursor to what I've seen in every eye since: fearful pity. As I stepped out, they stepped back. Their horror of my disease was greater than their concern for my heart – so they, and everyone else I have seen since, stepped back.

Oh, how I repulsed those who saw me. Five years of leprosy had left my hands gnarled. Tips of my fingers were missing as were portions of an ear and my nose. At the sight of me, fathers grabbed their children. Mothers covered their faces. Children pointed and stared.

The rags on my body couldn't hide my sores. Nor could the wrap on my face hide the rage in my eyes. I didn't even try to hide it. How many nights did I shake my crippled fist at the silent sky? "What did I do to deserve this?" But never a reply.

Some think I sinned. Some think my parents sinned. I don't know. All I know is that I grew so tired of it all: sleeping in the colony, smelling the stench. I grew so tired of the damnable bell I was required to wear around my neck to warn people of my presence. As if I needed it. One glance and the announcements began, "Unclean! Unclean! Unclean!"

Several weeks ago I dared walk the road to my village. I had no intent of entering. Heaven knows I only wanted to look again upon my fields. Gaze again upon my home. And see, perchance, the face of my wife. I did not see her. But I saw some children playing in a pasture. I hid behind a tree and watched them scamper and run. Their faces were so joyful and their laughter so contagious that for a moment, for just a moment, I was no longer a leper. I was a farmer. I was a father. I was a man.

Infused with their happiness, I stepped out from behind the tree, straightened my back, breathed deeply . . . and they saw me. Before I could retreat, they saw me. And they screamed. And they scattered. One lingered, though, behind the others. One paused and looked in my direction. I don't know, and I can't say for sure, but I think, I really think, she was my daughter. And I don't know, I really can't say for sure. But I think she was looking for her father.

That look is what made me take the step I took today. Of course it was reckless. Of course it was risky. But what did I have to lose? He calls himself God's Son. Either he will hear my complaint and kill me or accept my demands and heal me. Those were my thoughts. I came to him as a defiant man. Moved not by faith but by a desperate anger. God had wrought this calamity on my body, and he would either fix it or end it.

But then I saw him, and when I saw him, I was changed. You must remember, I'm a farmer, no a poet, so I cannot find the words to describe what I saw. All I can say is that the Judean mornings are sometimes so fresh and the sunrises so glorious that to look at them is to forget the heat of the day before and the hurt of times past. When I looked at his face, I saw a Judean morning.

Before he spoke, I knew he cared. Somehow I knew he hated this disease as much as, no - more - than I hate it. My rage became trust, and my anger became hope. From behind a rock, I watched him descend a hill. Throngs of people followed him. I waited until he was only paces from me, then I stepped out.

"Master!"

He stopped and looked in my direction as did dozens of others. A flood of fear swept across the crowd. Arms flew in front of faces. Children ducked behind parents. "Unclean!" someone shouted. Again, I don't blame them. I was a huddled mass of death. But I scarcely heard them. I scarcely saw them. Their panic I'd seen a thousand times. His compassion, however, I'd never beheld. Everyone stepped back except him. He stepped toward me. *Toward* me.

Five years ago my wife had stepped toward me. She was the last to do so. Now he did. I did not move. I just spoke. "Lord, you can heal me if you will." Had he healed me with a word, I would have been thrilled. Had he cured me with a prayer, I would have rejoiced. but he wasn't satisfied with speaking to me. He drew near me. He *touch*ed me. Five years ago my wife had touched me. No one had touched me since. Until today.

"I will." His words were as tender as his touch. "Be healed!"

Energy flooded my body like water through a furrowed field. In an instant, in a moment, I felt warmth where there had been numbness. I felt strength where there had been atrophy. My back straightened, and my head lifted. Where I had been eye level with his belt, I now stood eye level with his face. His smiling face.

He cupped his hands on my cheeks and drew me so near I could feel the warmth of his breath and see the wetness in his eyes. "Don't tell anyone about this. But go and show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded for people who are made well. This will show the people what I have done."

And so that is where I am going. I will show myself to my priest and embrace him. I will show myself to my wife, and I will embrace her. I will pick up my daughter, and I will embrace her. And I will never forget the one who dared to touch me. He could have healed me with a word. But he wanted to do more than heal me. He wanted to honor me, to validate me, to christen me. Imagine that . . . unworthy of the touch of a man, yet worthy of the touch of God.

(from the book: "Just Like Jesus" by Max Lucado)

How those few minutes in the presence of Jesus changed that leper's life. For he was made clean, he was made whole. He was given his life back. And he was so excited, so thrilled, that he couldn't stand to follow Jesus' instructions to him. Jesus had told him to go quietly and show himself to the priest. Not to spread it all over the place that he had been healed by Jesus. We don't really know why Jesus wanted it kept a secret. Maybe because he wanted to avoid all the curiosity seekers that the news would draw. Maybe he was afraid that the crowds were seeking him out only for physical healing and would not hear the message he had come to bring, would never know that he had come not only to heal their bodies but to heal and save their souls.

For whatever reason, he asked the leper not to say anything to anyone about the healing. But he just couldn't do it. He *had* to tell. The news was too good to keep to himself. Because when the whole world thought him unclean, untouchable, Jesus cared enough to touch him and make him clean. And he wanted to shout it from the rooftops. Mark says: "He went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word." And, the result was just what Jesus knew it would be: "So that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter."

We can probably relate to that leper. We know how hard, if not impossible it would be to have a miracle like that take place in our lives and not tell anyone. We'd want to tell everyone we met, too. So why don't we? We might not think that we've had anything nearly as exciting happen to us, as happened to that leper, but haven't we, really? Maybe it doesn't seem as dramatic to us, but in a way, we've been given the same gift, received the same miracle as Jesus gave to that leper that day. Jesus gave that leper a new life. He was made clean. And Jesus has done the same for us. Through his death on the cross we were given new life. Our sins were washed away, we were made clean.

That ought to make us want to do exactly what that leper did: go out and begin telling everyone we meet the wonderful news. Tell them about Jesus, and what he's done for us, what he can do for them. If we would do that, maybe we would get the same results. Maybe we'd have to worry about the crowds trying to get into this church to find out more about this Jesus. We have such good news. May we open our hearts to truly receive it. And may we open our mouths to proclaim it.
To share this news with the world:

He touched me. Oh, he touched me!
And oh, the *joy* that floods my soul.
Something happened, and now I know,
he touched me, and made me whole.