

## B Epiphany 6

15 February 2009

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Ascension Lutheran Church, Landover Hills, Md.

## “The Healing Touch”

Mark 1.40-41

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our text is today’s Gospel story: A leper came to Jesus, begging him, kneeling and said, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, “I do choose: be made clean.”

That is our text and this morning I’d like you to think about “The Healing Touch”.

It is no secret that I am a movie buff. Some of you might remember the Kirk Douglas movie “Spartacus”. Spartacus is the leader of a slave revolt against the Roman empire. Rome sends army after army, general after general, against Spartacus and his army of slaves only to go down to one defeat after another. Spartacus and his army is finally defeated by General Crassus, and many of the rebellious slaves are recaptured.

General Crassus tells the captives they will not be punished if they will hand Spartacus over to him. Simply identify Spartacus or point out his dead body on the battle field. That’s all they have to do: give him Spartacus and they go free. One by one, each survivor stands up and says “I am Spartacus”... “No, I am Spartacus” ... “No, I am Spartacus”. Each would rather suffer a horrible death than give up their beloved leader.

There is that kind of drama in our Gospel story this morning. A leper comes to Jesus and says “If you choose, you can make me clean.” All eyes are on Jesus: what will he do?

Jesus might say, “Not now ... this is not the right time or the right place”. (Last week the theme of my sermon was that all healing comes from God but God does not **always** heal.) Or Jesus might have simply *said* “Be clean!” and the man would be healed. (Two weeks ago we talked about how Jesus teaches with authority: when Jesus speaks, something happens. Jesus says “Be still” and wind and wave **obey** him. Jesus says “Take up your bed and walk”, and a man who has been paralyzed does just that. Jesus says “Lazarus, come out!”, and a man dead **three days** steps out of his grave. So all Jesus had to do was *say* “Be clean” and the man would be healed.)

What will Jesus do?

He reaches out and touches the leper!

If that doesn’t grab you, think about what that means. In Jesus’ day leprosy was a devastating illness. Today we have medicines that cure it – I *still* wouldn’t want to get leprosy. But in Jesus’ day there were **no medicines** to deal with it. It was a horribly painful, disfiguring disease.

But it was **more** than that. It made you an outcast. It put you outside of society. It made you – in the eyes of the religious establishment – unclean. Un-holy. Un-acceptable. Outside of the community of God’s people. A leper could not come into the Temple – only the “pure”, only the “clean” could come into the Temple.

Leprosy did that to you ... and to anyone who ***touched*** a leper. Touching a leper made you unclean. Touching a leper made you unacceptable. Touching a leper put you outside of the community of God's people.

So what will Jesus do? All eyes are on him. Jesus could have played it safe: "Not now ... this is not the right time or the right place". OR Just said "Be clean" and the man would be healed.

Jesus ***touches*** the leper and make the leper's problem his own. Jesus takes the man's uncleanness on himself. Jesus accepts his "dirtiness" as his own.

As we gathered here this morning we began by acknowledging that before God we are unclean:

**We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you, Lord, in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.**

That can become, if we're not careful, just a bunch of "blah, blah, blah" that simply marks the beginning of the service. It can become – like table grace – simply a formality to launch us, no more meaningful than if I came out and said "On your marks, get set, go."

Or we can become like the religious establishment of Jesus day. Pay lip service to the fact that we are sinful, but then decide that some sins are ***worse*** than others. There are some sinners we'd just as soon not welcome here. We just wouldn't want them in our midst. We wouldn't want to "touch" them. They are our "lepers".

But the intention of those words at the beginning of the worship is for each of us to pause and realize and accept that before a holy and righteous God I am **unclean**. There is so much I've done that I should not have done. And so much that I've left undone.

"Lord, if you chose, you can make me clean."

And what Jesus does – in the Words of the absolution, in water, in bread and wine – what Jesus does is to reach out and touch us. And in touching us Jesus takes **our** uncleanness and accepts it as **his own**. Right here, right now, in this place – Jesus touches **us** and makes **himself** dirty.

But in that touch, that healing touch, **we** are made clean.

For me one of the most powerful articulations of the Gospel is 2 Corinthians 5.12: "For **our** sake ... God made Jesus who had no sin to **be** sin, so that in Christ you and I might become the righteousness of God."

Jesus didn't just **accept** our sin or **carry** our sin – at the cross Jesus **became** our sin so that our sin might **die** at the cross. Jesus became **my** sin, took on **my** uncleanness!

Whenever the Gospel is preached, whenever forgiveness in the name of Jesus is announced, at that moment Jesus **touches** us and becomes our sin so that **we** might be forgiven and clean in the eyes of God.

There is so much happening in our world today that drives us to despair. The economy is unraveling. An unusually large number of our families have been touched by the death of loved ones. Several of us are battling serious illness. And many of our families are being shaken by all

the stresses and strains.

Remember in the midst of all of that that there is nothing that touches our lives that has not already touched Jesus.

Are you battling illness? I'm sure Jesus had his share of colds and flu and knows what it is like to feel absolutely miserable.

Are you dealing with disappointment? Jesus was betrayed by a follower and saw all his so-called "friends" run away at the moment of his greatest need.

Does the specter of this crumbling economy haunt you? Remember Jesus was homeless his entire ministry.

Are you trying to cope with the loss of a loved one? Jesus wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus.

Is death staring you in the face.

Jesus died.

Any catastrophe that can touch our lives has already touched **Jesus**. He's accepted those burdens. He's accepted all the pain, the heartbreak, the tears. He's accepted it all. He takes it. And in taking it upon Himself touches our lives with healing grace.

And now, made clean before God by his healing touch, we can be like the religious establishment of Jesus day, drawing lines, deciding who is clean and unclean, who is in and who is out, who we like and who we don't like, who is acceptable and who is unacceptable.

Or we can seek the grace to be like Jesus, reaching across the lines and boundaries and walls we have built, touching people with the love of God. Touching people even when that means getting our hands dirty. Extending the healing touch of God's grace.

Picture this scene from an as-yet unmade movie: we are approached by someone living in the dungeon of despair. They need help. They may need a word of forgiveness. They may need a word of encouragement. They may need a shoulder to cry on. They may need the assurance that they are loved, forgiven, and accepted by God. They may need a helping hand, or a hand out.

And they have come to us.

One by one we stand up and say: "I am the Christ you're looking for"... "No, I am the Christ you are looking for." ... "I am the Christ you are looking for".

And through us they would experience "the healing touch".

In Jesus name. Amen.