

HEALED **-sermon** **based on Matthew 8:1-4; Luke** **5:12-15**

If you think Jesus touched him to cure his skin, you missed the best part of the miracle.

Jesus could have easily healed the man from a mile away with a single word. Instead, Jesus chose to do something dangerous. To really look at this man, to be with him, to know him, to look eyes with him and to touch him.

To the crowd, the man is not just sick, he is a monster. Flesh falling off the bone. The smell of death clinging to his clothes. He has not felt the warmth of a human hand in a decade. Let that sink in. Ten years without a touch. Ten years without a hug. Ten years of watching his own children run away in terror because, “Daddy is dangerous.”

This man had to keep yelling, “Unclean!” wherever he went until his voice was broken. It was his obligation to warn people to stay away from him. He was an

outcast. This man had forgotten what love felt like. He was an expert in rejection.

So, when this man throws himself at Jesus' feet, with his face buried in the dust, too afraid to look up, he is expecting stones and spit.

He quietly says, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." He was sure that he was not worth anything. The crowd pulled back in disgust, as if something filthy had been thrown at them. You can almost hear the short, sudden intake of breath. Gasping.

Mothers yanking their children back. Men grabbing rocks. To them, this is toxic waste. You don't touch it. You don't get near it. You burn it. You eliminate it.

But Jesus, notice his reaction. Jesus does not step back. He steps in. He does not cover his nose at the stench. He takes a deep breath.

He reaches out a hand, not a magic wand, not prosthetics, but a bare, human hand. He presses his hand

firmly onto the rotting open sores of the man's shoulder.

The crowd stopped breathing, unsure of what they were seeing. Technically, this rabbi Jesus just broke the Law and made himself unclean. That was technically and religiously. Personally, this Jesus just committed himself to living with the disease of leprosy by reaching out and touching the leper.

And the leper? He started weeping before the healing even happened.

I wonder why Jesus touched him before he healed him. Maybe because Jesus knew the isolation hurt more than the infection. He knew this man did not just need his skin fixed, he needed his heart restored. The man needed to know that he was not trash. Jesus touched the disease to say, "You are worth holding."

The shocking nature of Jesus's miracle is that he touched the leper without becoming contaminated. Perhaps Jesus's touch symbolizes

that Jesus identifies himself with sinners to secure their salvation. He takes our disease; we get his holiness. The cleansing he provides runs deeper than the skin's surface; it cleanses the body and the heart.

Leprosy is contagious. You touch death, you die. But Jesus flipped everything upside down. If Jesus was any sort of man, he was the upside-down man. Jesus touched the rot and the rot turned into new skin.

Does that describe you? Is that you Jesus is reaching out to touch? Maybe you feel like a spiritual leper, carrying secrets that make you feel dirty and unclean. Maybe you think, "If God saw who I really am, God would turn away in disgust."

Look at the outstretched hand of Jesus again. No gloves. No safe distance. Jesus is the only one not afraid of your mess. The only one willing to get his hands dirty just to make you clean.

Some people will say, “Clean yourself up, then you can come to God.”

Jesus says, “I am coming in the dirt to touch you and my touch is what makes you clean.”

If the one who knows your sickness best is not stepping back, why are you?

You are not too far gone. You are just within his reach. Are you going to believe the crowd that says you are toxic? Or believe the God who says you are worth holding?

Far from being merely a person with an awful skin condition that we don't have to worry about thanks to modern medicine, the leper is a mirror to our own plight. The leper reminds us that we too must cry out to Jesus for cleansing from sin's defilement and the sentence of death.

The good news of the gospel is that what Jesus said to the leper, he says to everyone who comes to him in faith: “I will heal you; be

clean.” And if you come to him, like this leper did, he will touch you, heal you, show you compassion and give you life.

Let’s conclude this sermon in a different manner than usual. Let me ask you some questions and give you a little time with each question to think about Jesus and the leper.

+How have you been a “leper”?

+Can you experience Jesus stretching out his hand to you and offering healing? Or have you been too afraid (or too proud) to ask for his help?

+Can you accept the outrageous and extravagant mercy of Jesus who offers healing with no conditions? Where do you need grace in your life?

+To whom do you need to reach out and offer a healing touch?