

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Touched by Compassion

David Orendorff Mark 1:40-45 February 12, 2006

We think of leprosy as a single disease. The first century was not nearly so precise. Leprosy was any disease that showed on the skin. It could be leprosy, or psoriasis, or eczema, or skin cancer, or boils, or any number of things. What all of these diseases have in common was that the afflicted looks dirty, unclean, and untouchable. A leper was someone who when seen was met with "yuukk," a sort of nausea in the stomach, and avoidance. Sometimes the fear and revulsion were so strong that the leper would be stoned and driven away.

Laws were made, both religious and civic, that kept lepers away from clean people. Removed from their homes, they were sent from kin and village to live, cast away, in the woods, or in caves, the garbage of humanity. They could not even go to the temple or the synagogue for prayers because it was said that even God did not want such unclean trash around. When the leper had to come among the clean people, they were to ring a bell and shout ahead of themselves, "I am a leper. I am unclean." Or in the simple form "Unclean! Unclean! Unclean!" All who would hear hid themselves.

It must have taken a great deal of courage for today's leper to walk into town, shouting before himself, "Unclean!" in an attempt to come to Jesus. He might be stoned and driven away. He might die. And even if he made it to Jesus, should actually stand before Jesus and beg for mercy, for cleansing, he might be rejected. And if Jesus, who loved so many others, did not love him, refused to touch him, and sent him away, then there was no hope forever.

But this leper is driven to come. Perhaps he comes because he sees no end to his suffering. Maybe his pain is so great that he does not care if he dies. Perhaps he comes because being unclean means being unloved, and being without love is worse than being dead. Maybe he comes because he wants more than anything to go home to his wife and his children, his mother and his father, his brothers and his sisters, his friends, and his faith. For whatever reason, he comes begging to be made clean, to be touchable once again. By great faith or great pain, he comes ringing his bell and shouting, "I am a leper. I am unclean!"

Jesus hears the cry of the leper. And instead of being moved by revulsion, he is moved with compassion. His insides do not turn nauseous, but reach out in empathy. He joins with the misery of the leper in love. Jesus knows the rules. He knows that everyone else believes that this foul man is cursed by God. Jesus knows that he is not to touch the pus-laden and rotting flesh, not to even speak with it. Yet he is moved by compassion, and compassion directs him not to the laws of purity, but to the law of grace, to caring for this suffering child of his father. Jesus, against the law of state and temple, follows the law of God and loves the leper.

So when the leper says to him, "If you want it, you can make me clean," Jesus stretches out his arm, and with his hand touches the leper saying, "I want it. Be made clean!" From compassion comes the touch and the words that make this unclean man clean, makes an unholy man holy. In that moment, born from a suffering desire to go home and a law rejecting desire to help, a wound is touched, and love comes again. The leper can go home.

On the way home, the leper tells everyone he meets about how he was touched by Jesus. And everyone who hears wants that touch for themselves. Leprosy is not just of the skin, it is also of the soul. And every soul that knows its own dark secret, that sees its open or hidden sores in the mirror, sores that will not permit love, that divide and will not heal, wants the touch of Jesus. They come to him in such numbers that he can no longer enter their villages, but must touch them in the fields and deserted places.

Who of us does not want such a touch on our lives? Is there not some bit of unclean in each of us? Though we don't have to ring bells and shout our coming, we still experience the rejection and revulsion of those angry or disappointed in us. A couple of rejections, a few angry words, and we see ourselves in the disappointed and hurt eyes of another and we believe we are unclean; we are a problem. And from this belief, it becomes easy for us to hate ourselves as we are hated. So coming in from the caves of hiding to present ourselves before the crowd and before Jesus when rejection is our history and being touched is but a vague and desperate hope, takes courage.

I like to think I would have been among those seeking to be touched by the love of Jesus. I know some of the places I fail to *be* love and *to* love. I usually know when I have hurt someone. I know when I have been an open wound and when I was afraid. And I know that it is not courage that leads me into the crowd and to Jesus, but the anguish of my leprosy. I come to Jesus not because I am brave, but because I want to love and be loved. I come to Jesus today, not because I am a good person, a righteous soul, but because I know I can be better if Jesus only wants it and will touch me. I want to be clean of the disease which steals love from me.

I was thinking about the leper and his desire to be loved while I was cleaning house. In the process of cleaning, I came upon a book of my High School class after our thirtieth reunion. That led me to remembering high school and many of my friends. I thought of Bill Fyock who, like me, played trumpet and loved math. We were odd that way together and with Bill, I felt a touch of companionship in our oddity.

I thought of Mary Kay Moore who, on a date in my senior year, asked me a question that focused my life. Mary Kay was not into math. She was brilliant in speech and debate. She sought good literature. She cared for people. It was a hard-won caring, because her family provided her with a rough start in life. I

would have thought she would be hiding like me.

We were outside of Casper, Wyoming, driving on the lonely highway that leads to Glendive. It was a cold and dry winter night. The air was clean and the stars were brilliant. Mary Kay asked, "What is most precious to you?" I hardly thought. The answer came from some place deep inside, and until that moment, mostly hidden from me. I told Mary Kay that what I wanted most in life, what was most precious to me, what meant more than gold, or fame, or even being good at math, was love. I told her that I wanted to be loved without conditions, and that I wanted to find someone to whom I could give my love without condition.

We didn't date much. I don't why. Later, Mary Kay would remind me of that night and tell me that there was power in my speaking of love, a power that made her want to give and receive unconditional love, as well.

As I remember it now, this must have been my first sermon delivered to a congregation of one. It must have been a moment in which Jesus touched me in the presence and love of Mary Kay, for it was a moment in which I came out of hiding and was touched by Jesus.

Over the ensuing thirty-five years, I have been touched in a hundred ways. I have love that abounds. Daily, Vickie kisses me, knowing my leprosy, and says, "I love you." I have two daughters whose love supersedes my many failures. I have two sons-in-law who, though they were duly warned, love me. Even after bad sermons and times of failed leadership, I get paid to be loved by you. Even strangers, people who have no good reason to care about me, find me with love, with a smile, with a gift.

I believe that the touch of compassion is common to all of us. It is my experience, that each of you have had a Mary Kay, a Jesus, in your life. And I believe each of you has been Mary Kay to someone's David, a Jesus to someone's leper.

I once had the opportunity to talk with a woman whose soul shines with great radiance. She doesn't see herself this way. The beginnings of her life were hard, with an abusive father and a mother who let it happen. Deep wounds and scars were set even before she was old enough to remember why. And in what is a danger for so many, she married her disease and suffered several years of abuse in her marriage. Now she is married to a wonderful man, but still suffers so deeply that doctors have trouble both with diagnosis and with the right medicine. There are days in which despair, seizures, or both will not let her be. Yet in all this, she has found God, who touches her, comforts her, cleanses her as she is able to bear it, and gives her the love she needs and deserves. After we spoke, she wrote to me:

During the night, my angels came to me, so I wrote a little poem about (my) feelings:

Lord, in the depths of my despair, I found you there.

With tears and pain, I bared my soul;

*I felt I had lost all control.
Then your angels, they came to me.
With thanks and praise, my prayers I raise,
For now I can fully see;
The love that Christ has for me.*

Although my life has been far from easy, and I have had to deal with a lot of pain and illness, I have also been blessed in many ways. I can feel the love of God so profoundly at times, maybe in ways others cannot, for I have felt deep despair and hopelessness and physical pain, and how can I feel the positive if I didn't have the negative to compare it with. I know about God's saving grace; for He has been there when I've been out of control and confused and all seemed black. I have seen the sparkle in a child's shining eye, seen the friendliness in a person's smile, and saw the beauty in a full blooming flower, and felt complete with nature. I have felt God's love as I lay with my ear on my husband's chest and listened to the slow, relaxing sound of his heartbeat as I gently fall asleep. I also have been able to empathize with others, because I too, have been in those same struggles and trials...

As I write this; I feel the warmth of the sun rays shine upon me, and as tears stream down my face I am thankful for who I am and the trials I have gone through, even the ones I'm trying to discover, maybe (this is the) pain that will ultimately lead to my healing.¹

My brothers and sisters, how I do pray it is the same for you. I pray that should any part of you be untouchable, you will cry out for mercy, and that someone, moved by compassion, will stretch out their arm for you; and with their hand, defying the laws of good advice, will touch you; will, without condition, love you, and say to you, "I want you clean. Be clean." I pray that in such a moment of unconditional love, you will know that you are indeed clean, that you are lovable; and that by the touch of compassion, you can go home.

Amen and Shalom.

¹ I have quoted the author, who wishes to remain anonymous, by her permission.