

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany, February 12, 2006, Liturgical Year "B"

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins, Curate

Scripture: Mark 1:40-45

"He is Willing!"

"Gracious Lord, we give you thanks and praise – that you are always with us – no matter what the difficulty – and that you are willing to touch us – and restore us to you. We ask your Holy Spirit to enlighten us, now – as we open your Word – and seek your Truth. In Jesus Name we pray – Amen."

- A man lies in his hospital bed – and he is surrounded by loved ones – but only months prior he was all alone. God restored relationships in his life – including the one between him and the Lord.
- A woman is 92 years old – and says that she feels as strong as she did when she was 55. She proclaims that "God has blessed her life so much. Praise be to God!"
- A woman in her late 80's lies in a hospice bed – and longs to be baptized – after meeting Jesus for the first time. Her life - her eternal life - is restored.
- A man has his life transformed – first by healing and then by calling. His life is never the same. He has been healed and enriched by Almighty God.

We are given stories or instances like these so that we will be inspired. We believe that God is active and involved in our lives – and we look to Him for blessings.

I would venture to say that maybe some of us here this morning might be thinking, **"Well, what about me? How come God doesn't do stuff like that for me? Does He care? Is God willing to take away my health problem? Is God willing to make MY life better? Is God willing to make His presence known in MY life?"**

I think it would be pretty safe to say that the "leper" in this morning's Gospel lesson used to think thoughts like that all the time, possibly even to the point of being totally consumed by them. You see, leprosy was a horrible skin disease – and covered a wide range of awful skin disorders. It wasn't just because of the physical effects, but because of the negative effects that it caused to a person socially. In Leviticus 13:45-46, God says that *"The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp."*

- There was **no cure** for leprosy.
- Many Jews regarded it as a punishment from God for sins committed.

I can imagine this man felt forsaken by God and hated by humanity every day of his life.

But somehow he had heard the good news about Jesus Christ.

- He heard about how Jesus healed a demon possessed man in the Capernaum synagogue.
- He had heard about how Jesus healed Simon Peter's mother in law.
- He had heard about all the people who came to him for healing, and
- how Jesus sent each one away **not only healed, but forgiven.**

Picture the leper saying to himself: **"Here's my big chance! Here's my chance to ask God for help! My big chance to ask God for healing!"**

As Leviticus tells us, back in Ancient Israel, Jewish people weren't allowed to associate with lepers. Lepers had to live outside of where the rest of the people lived. This man must have had a lot of

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"*chutzpa*" to approach the Son of God as He walked by. **Just by this man's presence - he could have made crowds of people ceremonially unclean.** He could have made the Lord Jesus ceremonially unclean!

This man instead approached Christ with the utmost humility. Verse 40 says "*and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.'*" Let me clarify something – the only translation that uses the word *choose* is the NRSV – the original Greek word "θέλης" means wish, desire, or willing. This man is asking Jesus if He is willing to heal him. More importantly the words translated as "you can make me clean" downplay the original Greek - which uses the verb "δύνασαι" from the root of "δυναμαι" to have power. This man is saying to Jesus - **If you are willing – you have the power to cleanse me – to make me clean – to make me new.** This was a profession of faith – that was expressed as he reached for Jesus to touch him and make him clean. This powerful "event" appears in three Gospels – Matthew 8:2, Luke 5:12, and Mark 1:40. Each account clearly relays the faith of this man – and his belief of the power that Jesus possesses – if He is willing.

Most "**Believing Christians**" do not have a hard time believing that God CAN work powerfully in our lives. However, we have a hard time believing that God WANTS to work powerfully in our lives. We have a hard time believing that God is "interested in little old me." St. Peter straightforwardly tells us the answer in 1 Peter 5:7 as he exhorts us to "*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*" Jesus really and truly does care!

That was the experience of this leper – he found out that in coming to Jesus – he became clean – he became whole again! In verse 41 of today's Gospel, it says "*Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.*" And then Jesus said five of the most beautiful words in all of scripture. "***I am willing. Be clean.***"

This is a most extraordinary verse for a number of reasons.

- First, we see the compassion of Christ. He **really does feel** what we are going through. **He really does care!**
- Next, notice that Jesus reached and touched the man. Jesus was willing to make Himself ceremonially unclean so that the leper could be clean. My brothers and sisters, this is a preview for us of what was about to happen on the cross. When Jesus died for our sins, he took upon himself all of our uncleanness; so that we could be forgiven by God; so that we could be cleansed by His blood.
- Another thing I want to draw your attention to is that **Jesus didn't have to touch this man to heal him.** He could have healed him from a distance. Instead Jesus reaches out and touches this man as a clear and tangible expression of His compassion. Remember what we saw in the verse from Leviticus: This man probably has not been touched in many years. If you touched a leper, you would be separated from your family, and you would be ceremonially unclean for a week.
- But Jesus was not going to let anything keep Him from showing this man the fullest extent of His love – including ceremonial law. With five wonderful words and just a touch of his hand, Jesus delivered this man - and saved him in every way that a man can be saved. Jesus healed him physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, this passage of Holy Scripture is certainly not meant to teach us that it is **ALWAYS** God's will to heal every disease. Instead it is meant to teach us **that Jesus is willing to**

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do whatever it takes to make us clean before Almighty God! I believe that what the Lord is trying to tell us is that **"I am willing to make your life whole once again. I am able to save you in every way that a person can be saved. I am willing to do tremendous acts of righteousness in your life."**

And that is just what Jesus does for us. Verse 42 says that "Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured." When Jesus Christ touches our lives, becoming our Lord and Savior - we are blessed with some immediate effects.

- Our sins are cleansed and washed away.
- We are adopted into the family of Almighty God.
- The Holy Spirit comes upon us.
- All these things are the wondrous result of the touch of Christ on our lives.

What we need to remember from all of this – is that when Jesus touches you – you cannot and will not remain the same. Jesus transforms lives – and this leper **COULD NO LONGER** live the life that he did previously. Because of Jesus' transforming love – this man was no longer an outcast – and made whole. That is what so many people leave out of this healing – that Jesus loves us enough to take us as we are – but Jesus loves us too much to leave us that way. **Jesus heals and transforms lives – and lifestyles!**

Jesus then tells the man, "*See to it that you do not tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.*" In other words, when the priest sees why you are there, he is going to know right away that you are a law abiding Jewish man. But at the same time he is also going to know that God has done something spectacular in your life. You won't need to tell the priest about it, because he's going to see you with his own eyes."

But there are other reasons why Jesus told him not to tell anyone. Jesus was not interested in becoming a much sought after "celebrity healer." Healing is just a small part of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was not about impressing people into belief. Jesus knows that real faith happens when people are convinced and convicted by His teaching and not by the spectacle of seeing someone getting healed. Romans 10:17 tells us that "*Faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*"

The leper was supposed to keep quiet – and not to tell anyone. But he was so excited by what happened to him that he couldn't stifle his excitement – and instead spread the word of what happened to him. We learn in verse 45 that he went out and began to talk freely – and began spreading the news.

When you are transformed by the saving touch of Jesus Christ, it is not easy to stifle it and keep it bottled up. I know that when I was healed in the Jordan River, I couldn't contain my excitement. At every opportunity - I was telling people, "Hey, look what happened to me! I feel like a new person!" I was walking pain free for the first time in years. I had to tell somebody!

Jesus was indeed willing to do some amazing things in the life of this Jewish leper. **I want you to know that Jesus Christ is willing to do great things in your life.** All you have to do is come and reach out to Christ - humbly - like the leper did - and say: **"Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean, and make me whole. Lord, if you are willing, you can do amazing things through me."**

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I ask you, this morning, to follow the example of this leper, right now - by coming forward to Jesus - for healing prayer – and the anointing touch of Jesus. We will have three stations – one with Fr. Ward, one with Deacon Ed, and one with me. We invite you to bring your troubles, your heartaches and your hurt to the Lord – **He is willing!**