

March 26, 2025 – 2 Kings 5:1-14 & Matthew 8:1-17

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us many things. It taught us things about the virus itself. It taught us things about medicine and respiratory treatments and vaccines in general. It taught us things about our government and economy. And it's still teaching us things, as we look back upon it with 20/20 hindsight.

But among the most important things it taught us was about psychology. Because the quarantines and social distancing policies of the pandemic had a profound effect on us psychologically. Simply put, human beings are not meant to be isolated in that way. It effects us emotionally and intellectually.

Depression went up. Suicide rates went up. Academic performance among students fell. Productivity fell, even for those whose jobs were well suited to working from home. Keeping the world at arm's length made us starved for human contact.

I want you to think back to that feeling of isolation that you felt during the pandemic and now imagine that it never ended. That it could never end. Imagine that you are sick and lonely. That you haven't touched another human being for months. Years, even. No hugs. No handshakes. Not even a tap on the shoulder. Completely alone. And it will never end. Until the day you finally die. And there may not even be a person willing to get close enough to bury your corpse.

That is the life of a leper in the ancient world. Lepers were the walking dead, as far as society was concerned. Whatever disease they had – and there were several that were classified as 'leprosy' – was deemed incurable. You were unclean and you would spread that uncleanness to everyone and everything around you.

And, to make matters worse, that uncleanness wasn't confined to your body. Among the Israelites and Jews, leprosy was assumed to be a physical manifestation of a spiritual condition. Leviticus 13 tells us:

*“The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.”*

To be declared unclean and permanently exiled from the camp are punishments you place upon the worst sinners. The only punishment worse than that is death. And so it was simply accepted as a given that leprosy was a divine punishment for sin. One that separated you from the community of God and so one that separated you from God himself.

And so, with all this in mind, we turn to this man in our Gospel lesson. For the second week in a row, now, our Gospel begins with Jesus coming down from a mountain. Last week, he was coming down from the mountain of the Transfiguration. This week, he is coming down from the mountain on which he delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is a lecture on the Law of God. It is an explanation of how much broader and more rigid the Law of God is than we believe that it is. Jesus' refrain throughout the entire sermon is, “You have heard that it is said... but I tell you...” You believe you can keep the Law in this way, but I tell you that you have already broken God's Law in all these other ways.

And so, having just held up the supreme importance of God's Law, I have to think that the great crowd that followed him were shocked by what happened next. For this leper who came to see Jesus was completely breaking the Law of God. He was supposed to live alone, away from everyone, warning people away from approaching him. And instead, he comes right into the midst of this crowd of people. Kneels down directly in front of Jesus.

So I have to think the crowd of people around Jesus are expecting him to be appalled. To proclaim how sinful this man was for even coming near to Jesus. To cast him out of his sight and preach God's judgement against this sinful leper, just as he has preached God's judgement against those who are guilty of hate or lust or divorce.

But of course, Jesus doesn't do that. He heals the leper. More than that, he heals him by stretching out his hand and touching him. Why? Why would Jesus touch him?

He didn't need to. We heard in our Old Testament lesson about another man who was healed of leprosy. Naaman, the commander of the army of Syria. Syria didn't have the religious regulations about leprosy that Israel had, but it was still a serious disease. Something that nobody would want to contract. Such that when Naaman shows up to Elisha's house, Elisha won't even come out to see him. Won't even get near him.

But he didn't need to. The Word of the Lord was enough. A promise from the Lord that if Naaman washed in the Jordan seven times, his flesh would be restored. Naaman didn't believe that the Word of the Lord was powerful enough. He thought the power to heal must be in the prophet or in the water of the river. But no, it was in the Word. And once he obeyed that Word, his flesh was restored like that of a little child. He was clean again.

The same thing happens just after the healing of the leper in our Gospel lesson. Another Gentile army commander, this time a Roman centurion, comes to Jesus seeking healing for his servant. This time, though, the centurion fully believes the Word of the Lord is enough. In fact, he tells Jesus not to even bother coming to his house. If Jesus says that the servant will be healed, the centurion has complete faith that it will be so. And it is. Jesus speaks the Word of the Lord and the servant is healed that very moment.

So Jesus didn't need to stretch out his hand and touch the leper, but he did. Why? Well, I think for two reasons. The first is for the benefit of the crowds. He wanted them to know that he did not fear this leprosy. He wanted them to know that he had complete control over every illness of body and soul.

That the normal rules didn't apply to Jesus. Normally, when something clean touches something unclean, the clean thing gets dirty. The healthy person gets sick. The holy person gets corrupted. But not with Jesus. When Jesus touches something unclean, the unclean thing becomes clean. The sick person becomes healthy. The corrupt person is forgiven. Jesus isn't subject to the diseases of this world, nor the sin of our hearts. He commands them, like a centurion commanding his soldiers.

So that's the first reason. But I think there's another reason why Jesus touched the leper. And that is because the leper needed to feel his touch. No one had touched that man in so long. No one had reached out their hand to him. But Jesus did. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched that man's body and he touched that man's soul. And the leper became clean. The leper was welcomed into the community of God again. The leper was welcomed into God's presence again.

Jesus touched the leper to show him that God still loved him. And Jesus touches us to show us that God still loves us. He stretches out his hand and he feeds us his Body and his Blood, for the forgiveness of all our sins. He stretches out his hand and he washes us with the waters of Holy Baptism so that we are born again, restored like little children in body and soul.

And Jesus stretches out his hand to touch the people of Boonville too. Because that's what we are. We are the hands and feet of the Lord. And it is our job to touch the untouchable. To shake the hands of those who are crushed by sin. To give a hug to those who haven't felt compassion in a long, long time.

To heal those who are sick. Sick with diseases of the body that just need a doctor's treatment. And sick with diseases of the soul that need the Great Physician's treatment. Jesus touches us through Word and Sacrament so that we can touch our neighbors with mercy and compassion. The hand of the Lord reaches out to us so that we can be the hand of the Lord to others.

Human beings are not meant to be isolated. It leaves us starved for human contact. Our Lord doesn't ever leave us isolated. He doesn't starve us for divine contact. He comes to us right here on a regular basis, to eat and to drink at his table. And to bring others into this great community of faith. So that we may all receive cleansing and restoration from his good and gracious hand. Amen.