

From The Pastor

Even today, the word leper or leprosy can evoke a reaction greater than the word itself. Taking the word in its true meaning is to understand the skin affliction characteristic of leprosy. Though difficult and painful, leprosy today is not the medical dilemma that it was in the time of Jesus.

Beyond the medical condition, the word 'leper' still takes on the social connotation or stigma of rejection, distance, or unclean. We use the word socially, usually as slang, to express disdain, distaste, or ill judgment against another person. People different than ourselves in any number of ways may be labeled or referred to as a 'leper'. It is not a pretty picture of our human behavior, but it is a social reality that remains prevalent in our time. Fear, small mindedness, insecurity, or just plain meanness are often the root of such social stigmas. Why are we as human beings so ready to judge and label a fellow human being because they are different from ourselves, or that they may be afflicted with an unsightly physical feature that is easy to exploit? This is not the way of Christ, and it is not to be our way. The gospel today is a poignant example of this.

Notice the stance of the leper. By social custom, this man is isolated from the larger body of the community because of his condition. Although it is true that there is a clear religious overlay on the condition of leprosy, the practical reality is that lepers were separated to limit the infection of others in the community. One might ask which condition is worse: the pain of the disease, or the social/religious rejection?

Despite his social norm, this man does not keep his distance from Jesus. He kneels before Jesus and offers both a statement and a question. As a statement, the man expresses confidence that Jesus is able to heal him. As a question, he is asking whether Jesus is willing to cure him. In other words, would you like to, or are you willing to cure me? This is an important and poignant question.

Many people do not believe in the healing ministries of the Church. For many it carries the stigma of sensationalism, or public faith for the sake of personal gain. Why don't more people believe in or take advantage of the Lord's power to heal? The question and request of this leper tells the story.

Many people will not ask for healing out of fear that it might not work. Many may believe that Jesus has the power to heal, yet they question whether Jesus desires to heal them. We are all blessed with the power to heal. We have the capacity to heal with our words, our touch, our actions, and our service. We all have the power of love, and we have all received the call to serve, yet too few people are willing to act in such a way. We have the ability to serve God, but we lack the will, or the desire to do so. Desire is nine-tenths of the task.

The man believed; he trusted that Jesus *could* cure him. He wanted to know if Jesus was *willing* to cure him. The response of Jesus is swift and clear: "I do will it. Be made clean." God wants us whole and free. God desires us to be cured and healed. Yet, one is more important than the other. This man was cured of his physical ailment, but he was not healed in his respect and obedience to God. He proclaimed the matter widely against Jesus' desire.

Bodies are cured; hearts, minds, and souls are healed. Better to be healed than to be cured. Physical ailments will not keep us from God in the same way as a wounded, broken, disordered heart or mind can. A cure is for a physical part of the body. Healing is for the wholeness of the person. Sometimes a physical ailment will remain, but a healing may happen in the heart or mind of the person that opens a new path to God and others. This healing of the emotions or inner tensions of dis-ease is often a first step that can lead to physical healing. The true cause of a physical ailment may be the anger, bitterness, or unforgiveness that has the heart and mind of a person bound up.

Jesus' fundamental mission is to call people to faith and a new understanding of the truth of God. Healing is one aspect of the ministry of Jesus. With great love and desire and with compassionate patience Jesus heals. Healing is a call to faith, to trust in a new relationship with God. Though important, Jesus was about more than healing. He told the man to keep his cure silent so that it did not frustrate the Lord's larger mission to move from town to town and preach the Kingdom.

God has the power and the desire to heal and make us whole. The challenging question is whether we are ready or willing to seek the wholeness God is offering. Can we trust God's will for our lives, even if that means less than perfect health? Can we trust God with our needs and desires even if God should disappoint us? Will you allow God to use you as you are for his purpose even if you do not feel competent or worthy? Worth is not ours to worry about. Being worthy is a gift we have been given by God. Are we willing to ask God for our desires, willing to accept his free response? God desires your healing. Do you?

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