

Touched By Jesus
By Jason Huff
Psalm 30, Leviticus 13:1-8 and 45-46, Luke 5:12-26

Our gospel reading this week is from Luke 5:12-26. Over the past several weeks, we've read how Jesus' fame has grown. This week, it becomes clear that even the outcasts of society have learned who He is...and he has also come to the attention of the religious leaders of the day. Here's what Luke writes. "While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him. Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." He said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

There's one portion of our service here at Church of the Covenant – and many of the other churches I've attended over the years – that is overwhelmingly popular but really hard to explain. It's the passing of the peace. Each week, after we hear a word from the week's worship leader, we stand up and greet one another. It's based in an ancient practice of the church. In the early church, the passing of the peace was practiced to show unity among members, that no matter how high or low in society you were, everyone was equal before Christ and that each person could give and receive the peace of Christ to another. In some places, it became a formal liturgy – one person says, "Peace be with you," and the other person says, "And also with you." Sometimes, it becomes just another thing to do in the church service. In our church, there's no formality to it, and often it becomes a quick time for catching up before the children's sermon. But no matter how it's done, it's almost always one of the favorite parts of the service. You can change around the music, you can shorten the sermon or make it longer, you can take out this or that, but there's never more controversy than when someone talks about taking the passing of the peace out of a service. Why is that? If we're looking for fellowship, that happens right after the service. We stand around and talk and mingle for a good long time after worship is done.

What I think makes the passing of the peace so popular throughout the universal church is the sense of touch. Think about how many hands you shook today during the passing of the peace. Think about how many hugs you gave and received. The passing of the peace can be incredibly meaningful because we've had physical contact with someone else we care about. Even those who are visitors get the sense that someone's glad they've come. Now not everyone is super-comfortable with hugs and handshakes, and that's OK. But there is something extraordinary about being able to come near to somebody else and relate to them in a personal way.

Now imagine with me something else on the other end of the spectrum. Imagine never being able to be close to someone again. Imagine having to live alone, not by choice, not because you preferred that lifestyle, but because of some disease you'd contracted. Imagine that, by law, you had to wear torn clothes, never looking neat and clean, so that those who might pass you by would have a warning to stay away. Imagine that the law made you cry out to people in the vicinity that you were unclean. Imagine that people wouldn't dare to touch you for fear that they too might become contaminated and share your fate. Imagine not knowing if you'd ever feel a hand on your shoulder or a hug ever again. Imagine never being able to go to church to worship God.

That kind of horrible situation was what faced the first man in the story today. We don't know exactly what problem the man had. In Leviticus 13 and 14, there are many different skin conditions discussed, all of which are grouped under the English term leprosy, but most are quite different from modern leprosy. The only reason that Leviticus gives for the quarantine of people with these skin conditions is the implication that their disease is infectious and could cause others to catch it. However, Jewish thinking on the matter was quite different. The Talmud is a collection of writings that lists the oral traditions and laws of Judaism and explains how the Bible was interpreted by the priests and rabbis. In the tradition listed in the Talmud, those who were afflicted by skin diseases were not simply unfortunate but were sinners who had brought God's punishment upon themselves. Though the Bible never says it, the people of the day believed it. And moreover, while the Bible never says anything about not touching a leper or helping one, the oral tradition made it clear that no one was ever to touch a leper for fear that either the disease or the leper's "moral failings" might jump from person to person.

When Jesus met the man from today's story, he was a complete and utter outcast in his society, seen as not only a diseased person but someone who must have sinned greatly to have this condition. Perhaps someone had shown pity on him. Maybe a friend or relative went out to find him and told him about this amazing man Jesus who had been healing throughout the countryside. The man believed the story was true and was willing to put his trust in Jesus...enough that he took a risk to break the rules and go into a town so that he might meet Jesus. It's clear that the man really is at the end of his rope...he begs Jesus. He has no pride, only the faith that Jesus can make him well. The leper doesn't say, "*If* you can, make me clean." Instead, he says, "Lord, if you are *willing*, you can make me clean." He doesn't even make the assumption that Jesus will do what he asks, only that Jesus might consider it. And as we know, this is just what Jesus came for, to release those held hostage by sickness and suffering.

So Jesus heals the man. At first, it seems surprising to us as modern readers that He sends the man back to the priest to make sacrifices. The man has been cleansed from his disease, after all. But Jesus wants the man to be restored fully. Jesus hasn't come to disobey the written law of the Old Testament. He has come to fulfill it. And it is the cleansed man's responsibility to follow the law so that he can once again be a part of the local community and part of the faith community. By going through the rituals described in Leviticus 14 for purification from a skin disease, the man would be accepted back into all parts of Jewish life. It's also important that Jesus wanted the man to go to the priest so that his cleansing would testify to God's goodness. He didn't cleanse the man for his own glory, but so that God the Father would be glorified.

But the aspect that we often miss in this account is that Jesus reached out and touched the man. It's easy to lose in the sweep of the story. But Jesus did something he didn't have to when he put his hand on the man for his healing. Although He didn't break the law, He did break a common taboo. Since Jesus was human Himself, there's no reason to believe that He couldn't have been affected by a contagious disease. Jesus touched the man anyway. He certainly didn't have to do it; in the second story that's part of today's reading, He simply speaks and a paralytic man is healed. But Jesus is willing...more than to just heal the man, but to welcome him back into the fold, to welcome him back to family and faith and a normal life, one where he could fully participate in the worship of God...to welcome him back to the world of touch and closeness and warmth. When we are touched by Jesus, we are invited back home, invited back into His love and His friendship and His peace.

The second story today flows out of the first one. The word spreads. Jesus is in demand. And Jesus is willing to help. But He also has His priorities straight. He knows that even the healing of the sick is not as important as making sure to be in a right relationship with His Father. Everything good that Jesus does flows from the relationship between Him and the Father and the Holy Spirit. Luke makes a point of this in the middle of the stories just so we notice it, so we realize that Jesus is setting an example. Everything that we do that's going to glorify God is empowered by God, and we have to be working on our relationship with Him to truly be right with Him and with others.

And then we see a switch. Jesus is teaching, and He's got new visitors in his classroom. Word of the leper's cleansing has spread throughout the religious community. He would have gone to Jerusalem to have been declared clean and the proper sacrifices made. It seems certain he told everyone he knew about Jesus the healer...because for the first time in Luke's gospel, the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees show up. Now the Pharisees were adamant about keeping the Law of Moses as they understood it. They were the truly "religious" people of the day. They knew the law and they kept it, as far as they were concerned. But at this point, they are really genuinely curious about Jesus, and part of it comes from the rabbinical tradition. According to their oral customs, healing a leper was so difficult, so impossible, that it was considered almost on the same par as raising someone from the dead. Jesus seems to have true power from God to be able to do such a thing. And so they listen, waiting to hear a wrong word that might condemn Jesus as a false prophet, but also perhaps hoping that this might be the long-awaited Messiah.

Everything is going fine...right up until a group of men start peeling through the roof. They know their friend could be healed by Jesus, but they can't get to Him. For these folks who believe, though, it's not a problem...they'll find a way. And Jesus is impressed by their belief. He tells the man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." Now again, this seems surprising. Why is that important? In the healing stories we've heard, Jesus has said nothing about sin. But again, Jesus is playing off of the popular belief of the day. The rabbis had a saying about the paralyzed: "not until a man's sins are forgiven will he get off of his mat and walk." Did the man need forgiveness? Yes, but only as much as we all do. But this threw the Pharisees into an internal debate. Was Jesus blaspheming? Only God can forgive sin! But Jesus knew it and made His case. He asks them, is it easier to *say* sins are forgiven, or is it easier to actually *do* something as profound as healing a lame man? And before they know it, there the man is, walking home singing a praise song.

And they don't know what to make of it. When the translation has the people saying, "We have seen remarkable things today," it doesn't capture what's really said. In the Greek, the word used is *paradoxa* – and it means the same thing as our word "paradox." It's strange, wonderful, confusing, hard to believe – a man can forgive sins and yet not be blaspheming. How? As they will eventually learn, it's because the Son of God has come to us as a man with the power of God in hand. They too have been touched by Jesus. One man went home jumping for joy and worshipping. The rest...they aren't sure that they want to be touched by Jesus. They aren't sure that they are ready for what it might mean.

And that's the core of what we have to ask ourselves today – are we ready for the touch of Jesus on our shoulder? Because just like with the leper, He is ready to reach out and touch us and make us clean. He is ready to heal us, ready for us to become a part of His life and His community. But when you've been touched by Jesus, you will never be the same. And you will know it, because being touched by Jesus radically affects every part of who you are. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. The people healed in today's story may have had sin issues...their society said they did...Jesus outright stated that one of them was forgiven his sins...but it doesn't really matter. Because Jesus came so that if we would confess our sin and turn to Him, He would forgive us of everything we have ever done that was sinful.

Being touched by Jesus means being able to come into a faith community and being welcomed, no matter what's in your past. Being touched by Jesus means that when you've become a part of the body of believers called the church, you know that His love for You is real. Being touched by Jesus means that you cannot ignore His call on your life but that He is calling you on to something more, to a better life, to eternal life, in Him. You may never have experienced this kind of touch. For some of us who've been church members most of our lives, we've tried to follow along, we've participated, we've come to events, we may have even served on the Deacons or on Session, but we've never really responded to that touch. Others of us are afraid that His touch will be too overwhelming for us. Maybe it's because it's a little scary to give everything over to God. Maybe it's because that touch means that we will be healed from sins we still cling to. But the good news is, Jesus is willing. Jesus will stretch out His hand and touch you no matter your situation. He wants you to be clean.

I want to share a story of a friend of mine who knew the touch of Jesus very personally. Her name is Tracey. In her teens, she was a beautiful young model in Los Angeles who'd already been featured on the cover of a fashion magazine. She'd worked on the runways and had been offered all sorts of college scholarships. She had gone to church and knew of Jesus, even read the Bible occasionally, but she found herself entranced by the self-indulgent life of a model. At eighteen, she found herself pregnant, led to an abortion clinic by a boyfriend who left her a week afterwards. She felt numb and totally isolated from God. She went to college in Texas to try and get away from that past, only to find herself pregnant again. An intentional miscarriage from constant exercise resulted. Before a year was up, she had left school and was back in LA, but now into the party scene of drugs and alcohol. A failed marriage and another abortion later, she felt like she was in a deep pit. She had long ago separated herself from her family. Like the leper in the story today, she felt isolated...alone...unclean...without hope of a cure or a rescue. She describes herself in that time as "one of the walking dead."

It was at that darkest place, that time when everything was bleakest, that Jesus touched her. As she puts it, "I began to read my Bible for the first time in at least a decade...I read passages where God promised to take my heart of stone and turn it into a heart of flesh. He promised to take the ashes in my life and turn them into beauty...God did exactly for me what He had done many times in the Bible. He took the woman who had been lost in her sins and He saved me and He forgave me and He washed me clean." God touched her in many ways. She and her husband David have three children, even though she was told that she would never be able to have any after the damage done to her body. We met David and Tracey at seminary, and now Tracey is a pastor's wife. They have a church out in Golita, California where they are doing family ministry. She has spoken at national women's conferences about her experience. And the core of her message is, she is not the same person she was because of the touch of Jesus on her life.

So the question is, where are you today? Are you like the leper who knows that he wants to be clean? Are you like my friend Tracey, who felt like she could never be forgiven for all the things she'd done? All you have to do is put your faith in Christ and be genuine in your desire to turn from your sin, and He will wash you...just like the song we sang this morning said, "Though my sins were as scarlet, Lord, You know that I'm clean and forgiven...through the power of Your blood, through the wonder of Your love, through faith in You I know that I can be white as snow." You can trust in Him today to forgive anything and everything in your past. No one is too far gone, and no one is beyond the loving reach of Jesus' hand.

Or maybe you are like the Pharisee. Maybe you believe that you can earn salvation on your own. Maybe all this talk about Jesus makes you uncomfortable because it doesn't fit with your view of religion. Maybe it seems too much to turn over everything to Him. Maybe you aren't sure you need a savior because you aren't sure what you need to be saved from! For you, I say, take a leap of faith and trust God. Trust God enough to put aside those things that bother you and just embrace Jesus as the friend who wants to be by your side, who wants to show you how He can remake your life in ways you never knew possible. Give Him the chance to do His work inside you too.

Or maybe you are like the lame man's friends who know the power of Jesus' touch. Maybe you've experienced it in your own life. And my encouragement to you today is this...don't let anything stop you from bringing your friends to Jesus so they may know His power and touch too. The paralytic's friends were so insistent that he see Jesus, they tore the roof off a building! Let's do that! Let's fight through the barriers and get our friends and family here to church so that they might know God's love. Last week, we talked about becoming fishers of men. Let's encourage one another to start fishing in whatever pond God leads us to.

Jesus reached out to the leper and the lame man. He wants to reach out to you and to the world around you. Come to Him. Let Him heal you. Trust Him even when it seems difficult or hard. Tell others about what He's doing in Your life. And you will be made clean. You will know Jesus' touch. And you will never be the same. Praise God! Let's pray to Him.