

3rd Sunday after Epiphany, 2006

Text: Matthew 8:1-13

Trinity Lutheran, Worden, IL & Zion Lutheran, Carpenter, IL

Pastor H. R. Curtis

XGrace and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord
and Savior, Jesus Christ X

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy
Spirit. Amen.

"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.' 46 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." Thus says the Lord in Leviticus 13:45-46. But why does the Lord say it? Why did God command his people of old in Israel to cast out the leper from their midst? Why is this contagious disease different from others? God did not command the man with the flu to leave the camp. God singles out leprosy and calls it unclean and commands that such people be separated from his holy people and his holy tabernacle, from his Passover meal, and the daily sacrifice. They are cast out.

Why did the Lord single out leprosy? Because, while not sin itself, of course, leprosy is the perfect picture of human sin. Leprosy starts as a patch on the skin – and try as one might, no amount of washing will cleanse it or stop it from spreading. And leprosy is contagious, one person infecting another. And so it is with your sin. Try as you might you cannot wash your memory clean of that thing you did or said that haunts you still. It robs you of sleep at night as you replay it in your mind. No amount of saying you're sorry or wishing it weren't so can make it go away – just as no amount of such wishes will make leprosy go away. And have you not seen sin spread from one person to another just as a contagious leprosy? Cruel words beget more cruel words; a sour mood starts in one mouth and spreads through a family gathering or a business meeting. Can anyone claim never to have been the one causing the infection? Note well also how Leviticus says that the person with leprosy shall live alone. Has anyone never felt the loneliness of being separated from another person due to biting words and held over grudges?

In fact, leprosy has this one advantage over sin – like beauty it is only skin deep, but sin is to the bone. So look on this leper in today's Gospel lesson and learn to see yourself: torn clothes, disheveled hair, cast out and unclean. Look at this picture of your sin in God's Word today and repent – for while this bad news is very bad, the good and sweet news of Jesus Christ is every so much better. Turn away from mourning over your uncleanness, from ruminating over sins past, from holding a grudge against your neighbor or yourself – turn away from all this, get your eyes and your mind up off the leprosy and come to this Jesus.

For behold how all things are undone and made new when God walks the earth in human flesh. Once God commanded lepers to live outside the camp, away from his tabernacle, away from his people to teach them to fear sin and its contagion – but now behold, the true Tabernacle of God, God dwelling in the flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ. He does not send this leper away. He does not chastise him for failing to cry out "Unclean!" and run away. Rather, Jesus receives this leper, this living picture of sinful humanity, and he touches him.

Miracle of miracles Jesus touches him. And now behold – the leprosy does not spread to Jesus as it should have, Jesus' flesh is not infected with this disease and sign of death, for in Jesus all things are made new. The leprosy is cleansed away. The flesh of Jesus gives life and healing and drives away all sin, washing it clean.

Dear Christian, God saw to it that St. Matthew would record this happening for your benefit – that your heart might be comforted and that you might know God's love for you. For Jesus did not come to condemn the world but to save it. He came that you might have life and have it to the full. He is not afraid of your sin. He does not desire to cast you away because of what you have done or what you have been. He loves you with an everlasting love and gives you the truest healing which this healing of the leper signified.

For as Jesus touched this leper in his disease, so Jesus has come to you in your sin. For at the right time, while we were still sinners, God sent his Son Jesus to give his life in our place. God the Father mercifully sent our Lord Jesus to become sin for us, that we might become cleansed. Jesus takes upon himself the weight of the world's sin – which is God's wrath against sin – and bears it for us on the cross. As Isaiah says,

on him was laid the iniquity of us all, and he bore all our diseases, by his stripes we are healed.

And so it is with you – the Lord has borne each and every one of your offenses and more than that he has brought you his healing touch. And I am not speaking metaphorically or in word pictures – but he has really touched you. For this is the truth of the Sacraments which our Lord has given us. For as Paul says to the Colossians, "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the flesh, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."

Yes, in your baptism, your Lord Jesus has touched you and made you clean just as he touched and cleansed this leper. Paul says it is not the human hands that matter for Christ does this baptism. For, as Luther says in the Large Catechism, "to be baptized in the name of God is to be baptized not by men, but by God Himself." This healing touch of Christ in Holy Baptism has brought you salvation, wholeness, and cleansing. These baptismal waters are the waters that can truly wash away the guilt and shame of sin. And is this not the message preached by our Old Testament lesson today when Naaman's leprosy is washed away by the waters of the Jordan due to God's miraculous word? God was thinking about your baptism even way back then, showing you a picture of it in Naaman. Surely there is no greater comfort than this holy gift of baptism.

But there is a comfort just as great – for all God's gifts are his best gifts. There is also the gift of confession and absolution, which Luther calls a return to Baptism. And then there is also the gift of the healing body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar. One Christian theologian has fittingly called this Sacrament the "medicine of immortality." For what all earthly medicines are incapable of, our Lord's flesh and blood provides: life everlasting.

This most blessed and life-giving Sacrament of the Altar finds its place in our Gospel reading today as well. The centurion runs up to Jesus and kneels before him and then prays, "Lord I am not worthy that you would come under my roof, but only say the word, and your servant shall be whole." This prayer of the faithful centurion has for centuries been one of the prayers of preparation for the Holy Communion. For in the Holy Communion we receive a like gift to that of the centurion – the Real Presence

of our Lord Jesus Christ in the very flesh. That is why in the traditional Lutheran liturgy the pastor bows profoundly or kneels after the Words of Institution – this is done because its Biblical, for that is what people in the New Testament, like this centurion, always do when they encounter Jesus in the flesh. That is why in some of our churches a rail is provided at which to kneel while receiving the Sacrament, and at all our churches the communicants bow upon approaching the blessed Sacrament. So whether we kneel or we bow, we come to the Lord's Supper with our hearts aligned with this kneeling centurion for we confess that our Lord is here by his miraculous Word in the flesh for our salvation.

And thus it is very appropriate that the faithful pray this little prayer of the centurion as they come forward to receive the Sacrament of the Altar: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but say the word and your servant shall be healed." We confess that we are in no way worthy to receive the flesh and blood of Christ under the roof of our mouths, but that we shall obey his word and so be healed. And his gracious word is this: Take eat, this is my body; take drink, this is my blood; given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

What a gift! Where our earthly flesh may be afflicted with leprosy, or cancer, or the flu, or some other disease, where our flesh starts out soft and fresh in our infancy only to grow old and aged with time, the risen flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ gives forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. Truly this is the medicine of immortality which puts to shame all earthly medicines. Just as there was no earthly medicine that could cure that leper or the centurion's servant, so there is no earthly medicine that can cure our deepest need and deepest sickness. Medical science has made many a great advance – we have medicines today that are just short of miraculous and can lend years of life where once there would have been death. But these medicines are short of miraculous – for there is not now, and never will there be, a medicine made in a laboratory that can give eternal life.

But here in Christ's Church such a medicine can be found. It is a gift of the Lord and this gift is ever new and it is ever welcome for it is ever needed. For surely we all sin much and so need this forgiveness offered in the Sacrament of the Altar. But there is still more – for where there is forgiveness, where there is the blood and flesh of Christ, there is also life and

salvation. How can those whom Christ has filled with his risen flesh and blood be subject to death? How can those who have the most intimate connection with Jesus ever have any fear of condemnation?

These promises are yours dear Christian. So though you may be tempted to think that some sin of yours is too big, or too foul, or too powerful for Christ to overcome – think again. That is a lie of the devil. For Christ poured out his blood for you. He gave his body on the cross for you. And now he offers you that very same body and blood to you for your life and salvation. This gift of Christ blots out all sin. Now truly, having repented of your sin and received these the holy gifts of Christ, your sins are removed from you as far as the East is from the West. Now truly, God remembers your sin no more. He remembers them no more – think on that when you are tempted to remember them and think that they cannot be forgiven. What God remembers is the sacrifice of his Son on the cross. What God remembers is that he promised to save you in your baptism. What God remembers is that you are fed with the body and blood of Christ and so have the very life of God put in you. O Christian, think on these things. And hasten back next week to this altar to receive this gift.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Now the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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