

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday,
October 23, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 8:1-3

1 When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. 2 A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

3 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD'S KINGDOM #34 **THE KINGDOM ON THE MOVE**

Imagine what it would have been like to be there. This new rabbi taught like no one else. He revealed truth. His teaching had radical implications. He spoke as if speaking to your very soul and the truth of His words penetrated the soul. He was the embodiment of the Holy Word of God, and therefore His words were living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, the teaching of Christ penetrated even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. Christ's words judged the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

As he taught on a hill against the backdrop of the Sea of Galilee a huge crowd had gathered. It seemed as if every community around the Sea had outsiders. Have you ever felt like an outsider? Perhaps this outsider was close enough to hear the words that Jesus spoke. The rabbi who kept the crowds riveted for hours was finally through. The crowd, which had now been dismissed, debated excitedly the true meaning of the radical implications of Jesus' manifesto of the Kingdom of God. And no doubt, as many discussed, most ignored the disfigured and diseased outsider, considered by all orthodox Jews to be unclean. The outsider was looked down upon. He was considered by most to be a scourge on the community, worth nothing. He would have been considered the victim of his own sin. It was his sin that brought about the awful disease known as leprosy. It was his sin that caused the heavy hand of Jehovah God to strike him hard. It was his sin that made him a nothing. Nobody was to blame but him. At least that is how society viewed it.

Today's message is going to be a little different. For today, we're going to peel back 2,000 years of history and look at what it might have been like to encounter Jesus that day. I'm going to tell the story in first person drama form from the perspective of man with leprosy. I'll take dramatic license in telling his story. My hope is that we might see Jesus with fresh eyes by taking a look at the Savior from the eyes of the outcast. Listen to Matthew 8:1-3.

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[PUT ON FISHING HAT AND PICK UP NET]

I'll never forget the day it happened. It was almost three decades ago and my wife Miriam and I were living a blessed life. I was a fisherman, plying my trade on the Sea of Galilee. Almost every person in our town was impacted by the fishing industry. Sure there were farmers and carpenters, shepherds and soldiers, but everyone loved the bounty that came out of our beautiful lake. That's what the Sea of Galilee really is. It's a lake, not much different than your Minnesota lakes. The rolling hills around the lake reach nearly 1,400 feet above sea level, giving the sister towns around the lake a picturesque quality that makes towns like Capernaum, Tiberias, Bethsaida, and Gennesaret a vacationer's delight. From the Sea we had a beautiful view of what you know today as the Golan Heights; mountains that rise 2,500 feet above sea level. It was indeed a beautiful place to call home.

Miriam and I had carved out quite a good life. Our children had good friends. We loved to entertain in our home, inviting friends and family over for good conversation, games and stories about the lake. Our synagogue taught us how to live. We were far from the political upheaval of Jerusalem, and I loved it here. We had it good. And then it happened and everything changed!

I was preparing to leave for my normal day of fishing on the lake. The older kids were in school. I had hugged them goodbye. My youngest was still at home. I was shaving and trying to put a nagging thought out of my mind. As I shaved, my blade cut my chin. My finger was cut too. I didn't know. I couldn't feel it. The numbness in my hands and feet had been there for a while. I tried to put it out of my mind, but I couldn't. The fear of leprosy is ingrained in all of us from a young age. You see, leprosy was thought to be highly contagious. In our Jewish culture it was also thought to represent the judgment of God. He had three times, in our Scriptures, afflicted those who were shamefully disobedient with leprosy. To Miriam, my wife's namesake and the sister of Moses, leprosy had come in Numbers 12:6-10. My Miriam would always find it ironic that I would face the same scourge as Miriam.

Uzziah had faced the punishment of leprosy in 2 Chronicles 26:19. And, Gehazi was afflicted with this judgment in 2 Kings 5:25-27. So don't be so quick to judge us as simpleminded and uneducated because we thought of leprosy as a judgment for sin. Besides, it would be almost 2,000 years after my affliction that Dr. Hansen would discover the true cause of leprosy. My disease was caused by the disappearance of the warning system that alerts a human being to pain. Your doctors have found that Hansen's Disease, as it is now called, "brings numbness to the extremities as well as to

the ears, eyes, and nose. The devastation that follows comes from such incidents as reaching one's hand into a charcoal fire to retrieve a dropped potato or washing one's face with water so hot that it burns or gripping a hoe too tightly while working in the fields so that great trauma is done to the hands causing them to ultimately become stumps."¹

I had cut myself so bad shaving, but without the aid of a mirror I didn't notice. I didn't notice the stream of blood running down my face. I failed to notice the blood from where my hands were cut. I will never forget Miriam's eyes. She was fearful. She was in pain. I could see her mind racing. What would she do? What would I do? What would become of our family? What would become of our home? A fisherman's life was not easy. I was not a rich man, but I had saved a little bit. It wouldn't last long. Miriam looked at me with sorrow. She was sorry for me. Sorry for herself. Sorry for our kids. Her unspoken words said what in my heart I knew was right. Even though it seemed so wrong, the only choice I had was to leave. There could be no final embrace. There was little I could do to contribute to the needs of my family. I was to become an outcast, living amongst outcasts, begging for my daily needs. I was to become a beggar with a painful and agonizing death sentence. My wife, for all practical purposes would become an outcast too.

For 30 long years I have lived on the outskirts of town. Levitical law required that I would wear torn clothes. I couldn't keep my hair nice, because the law required my hair to be unkempt. The lower part of my face was covered and whenever someone walked by I was to cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" I grew to hate those words. The law required that I would remain alone, outside of my community as long as I had the disease.

It was not uncommon for lepers to live together. Our bodies would rot together. We didn't want to see our reflections. The person who stared back at us from a pool or a mirror was but a hideous reminder of the life we used to have. Jewish law required that we remain 184 feet away from someone if we were upwind and 7.36 feet from someone if we were downwind from them. Josephus, the great Jewish historian wrote that we were, "in effect, dead men."²

"If only I was a dead man," was my thought on a daily basis. Living as unclean in my ultra-religious Israeli homeland was a fate worse than death.

For 30 long years I lived as an outcast. There had been occasional glances that I was given of my family. One day I saw my son playing with the other children of the village. I was glad that he was somewhat included. He was laughing and smiling, and then he saw me. As my son came near, I shouted, "Unclean! Unclean!" And his friends jeered at me, making fun of the "unclean leper." My heart broke as I watched my son try to speak up on my defense. There were words exchanged and punches thrown, but my

¹ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), p. 261.

² William Barclay, *Matthew, Volume Two* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.), p. 301.

son was shamed when one of the boys shouted, "It was your father's sin that brought this upon him."

I was no more a sinner than any other man in my region. Why were the children so cruel? Why were the looks so painful? Why would God allow this to happen to me? Why had He even allowed such a hideous disease to exist? There were many nights were I doubted the goodness of Jehovah.

I missed my daughter's wedding. I missed my grandson's birth. I missed the moments I used to take for granted. I missed the conversations and the end of the day. I missed pulling fish up from the Sea. I missed making a living. It's hard when your job is stripped away from you. There's a lot of pride a man takes in his work. I missed the celebrations – when the nation celebrated the four Jewish festivals and the towns across the Sea of Galilee came alive with throngs of visitors, I missed the inclusion. A leper's life is lonely, humiliating, painful, and full of sorrow.

I missed the nights with friends and family. I missed the touch of my wife. I missed her tender kisses. I missed her compassionate touch. It had been 30 years without an embrace; 30 years without someone's touch; 30 years without a kiss! And, in those 30 years, my body had been ravaged. The disease had taken its toll. Where there were fingers and toes were now stumps. My face looked like something out of a horror story. Children were afraid of me. For 30 long years kids shielded their eyes as they passed me. Before this happened I was the adult kids seemed to flock to. Now, I was the person who inhabited their nightmares.

I prayed and I prayed and I prayed that God would be merciful and just take my life. Then my wife would be free to marry again. She would be taken care of.

I loved God. I tried my best to live a life that pleased him. I tried to be an honorable man. I wondered what the sin was that I committed that was so great that it would cause this terrible event to come upon my family. I was so alone and in such pain. There were nights I considered ending my life. It would have been easier. But, my faith taught me that this wasn't a viable option. God knew what was happening to me. I believed He loved me, even though it didn't feel like it. My begging took care of my most basic needs. My family somehow got by. God provided for their needs. And I was grateful for at least that.

Just as I will never forget the day that I was afflicted with leprosy, so I will never forget the day that I met Jesus. He had been spending much time in the villages around the Sea of Galilee. The young rabbi was growing in influence. Many men from the towns around Galilee had become his disciples; men like James and John, Peter and Andrew.

I had seen Jesus before. He walked past me on a few occasions. And, as He did, I yelled out, "Unclean! Unclean!"

There was something special about Jesus. You know how when some people pass you by, you just want to get to know them. There is something special about them. You can see a kindness about them. There is a gentle way in which they treat others. There are some people that just seem to bring out the best in others around them. That was Jesus. There was compassion in His eyes even when He passed me by.

One day Jesus gathered a huge crowd around him. They sat for hours. From daybreak to near sunset the crowds listened to Jesus teach. They even stayed through lunch. And when all was said and done the crowds were amazed. As people descended the mountain where Jesus taught, I listened to their words. Between my shouting, "Unclean! Unclean!" and begging for money, I listened to what people said.

Some said, "No one has ever taught like Jesus."

Some said, "He taught as one with authority."

Some said, "He is a heretic. He is doing away with our law. He teaches a different message than the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem."

Men and women talked excitedly about those whom Jesus called blessed. There was debate over what it meant to be poor in spirit. There was debate over Jesus' expanded definition of adultery. There was debate over what Jesus meant by a wide and a narrow path.

I had never heard such talk after a rabbi had finished teaching. The air was electric. Everybody was talking about the sermon they had just heard. I wished I had been able to watch it in person. I knew Jesus was special. There was something about Him that made me wonder if He might be more than special. I wondered if He might be the long promised Messiah.

I continued to shout, "Unclean! Unclean!" as the crowds made their way past me. I had never seen so many people moving in this part of the city. Keep in mind, I lived on the outskirts of town, outside the city gate. But, Jesus had picked a place to teach that required that many would walk right past me. Little did I dream that Jesus would be one of those many who walk by that early evening!

Apparently when Jesus dismissed crowds, they still followed. They wanted to hear more. They wanted Him to reveal more truth. They wanted to know the practical implications of what it meant to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God. And so He continued to teach as He walked. Little did the crowd know, that Jesus was about to show them what it meant to live the radical life of the Kingdom of God. Little did I know that I would be such an important part of Jesus' object lesson!

As Jesus and the crowd approached, I didn't know that it was the rabbi who was coming my way. I just shouted out, "Unclean! Unclean!"

Most of those in the crowd ignored me. I asked for funds, and some looked upon me with disgust. But then my eyes caught Jesus' eyes. Those tender, powerful eyes looked upon me once again. I don't know what came over me, but I did the unthinkable for a leper. I stood, near a crowd of "clean" Jews. I stood by those who used to be my neighbors. I stood by the now grown children who used to make fun of my son. I, the unclean approached the "clean."

Some in the crowd screamed, "Get away! You will make us unclean, you fool!"

Some of the mothers shielded their children's eyes.

Jesus just looked at me.

The crowd parted quickly, not wanting to get too close to the disfigured sinner, with the highly contagious disease. All eyes were upon Jesus and me.

I felt more than a bit foolish. I wondered if a soldier in the crowd might draw his sword and put it through me. It would have been an appropriate punishment, as far as society was concerned. No one moved.

I bowed in front of Jesus. He looked at me with those eyes. He made sure that His eyes were locked with mine. There was no condemnation in His eyes. There was no horror. There was no disgust. When Jesus looked at me, the best description that I can give is that He loved me. I could hardly believe what I heard come out of my mouth, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean," I said.

I didn't ask Him to heal me; although, that's what would have been required for me to be clean in my society. I wanted spiritual healing. I wanted wholeness. I wanted to experience the touch of God. This Jesus knew God like I didn't. I believed that He could do something wonderful for me.

I had no idea if He would do something or not. Well, Jesus did something!

For the first time in 30 years, I felt another human being touch me. Jesus reached out His hand and touched me.

The crowd gasped!

There were some who murmured, "What is He thinking? The rabbi has just become unclean!"

Jesus didn't care what they thought. His eyes locked upon mine. "I am willing," Jesus said. "Be clean!"

I could hardly believe my ears. "Be clean!" Jesus said.

I almost missed though. Because, I was still blown away at His touch. I've got to tell you, I felt wonderful. I had been touched by the rabbi. But, furthermore, he had declared me clean.

It is one thing to declare a leper clean. It is another, entirely different thing to see a leper healed. Immediately I was cured of my leprosy!

Stumps became fingers. Holes in my face became skin. My ears were healed. My toes were no longer gone. My forehead and eyebrows returned to their natural state. My hideous appearance became whole. I was like a brand new man.

The crowd was in shock. Jesus didn't just talk a good game, He lived it. He lived the Sermon on the Mount.

Your scholars, R.C. Trench and Kent Hughes have written, "Though the leper was not worse or guiltier than his fellow Jews, nevertheless he was a parable of sin – an 'outward and visible sign of an innermost spiritual condition.' The leper is a physical illustration of the heart of every human being! If for one moment we could see a visible incarnation of ourselves apart from the cleansing work of Christ, we would see ourselves as the walking dead – forms dead in their trespasses and sins – forms trying to cover themselves with filthy rags."³

My friends, I was a picture of the spiritual condition of every man, woman, boy or girl to ever live. All of us, apart from Christ are like lepers. Healing begins when we recognize our uncleanness and shout, "Unclean! Unclean!" to God.

It's like Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven!" We can't experience that until we recognize the true condition of our hearts. So many in my day and age were content to see me as unclean, but couldn't see the true condition of their heart.

Healing continues when you humble yourself before God, recognizing that He is your only hope. That healing is sealed when we place our faith in Jesus Christ, who was more than a rabbi, more than a great teacher, more than a man. Jesus, the One Who touched me, is God. He is Messiah! He can take our leprous hearts and make them clean.

Christ's greatest work in me wasn't my physical healing, it was my spiritual healing. I hope you'll trust Him to do the same in you. And, if He already has, I hope you'll be the kingdom on the move, living the words of Christ wherever you go!

Amen.

³ Hughes, p. 262.