

He is Willing

Luke 5: 12-17

**First Presbyterian Church
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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

In our story from Luke's gospel, Jesus had entered one of the small cities in the area around the Sea of Galilee. A man came up to Jesus and fell at his feet. Luke tells us this man was full of leprosy. Leprosy refers to a range of skin diseases, many of them highly contagious, all of them unsightly. According to Leviticus, having leprosy made a person ritually unclean. You were excluded from the community. It was not just embarrassing in the way we find dandruff to be embarrassing today. Leprosy was truly shaming in that you were forced to live away from normal people. The uncleanness was like death. Death could not enter the camp where the living, holy God dwelt. So Leviticus tells us that the leper was to mourn himself like a dead man. He was to wear torn clothes and cry out his affliction saying, 'Unclean. Unclean.' "He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Lev. 13: 45-46). He had to self-identify as a leper.

One of the great shames of my junior high years is the way we treated a girl in our class who had poor hygiene. Yes, she needed to wash her hair more. Yes, she needed to not twist and then smell that hair in class. She needed to act more like a lady. OK, she smelled like a sub sandwich. We called her "The Accursed." Kids act out on a primal level this exclusion of others as unclean. Oh, it was great fun to me at the time. We laughed and laughed. But I know she heard us. And today I can imagine what it would be like to be the accursed one. It shames me now to think of shaming her then. I made her a leper, even though in elementary school she had always been my friend.

Lord, If You Will

So very boldly this leper made his way through the crowd. He broke taboos to get to Jesus. He endured scorn and mocking. He approached the Lord and fell before him. He began to beg. But here we discover that this was a *southern* leper. I hadn't realized that some of the Bible characters are actually from the Deep South. But this leper was surely raised below the Mason Dixon line. How do I know that? Because he doesn't make a direct request. He knows what happens when a southern woman sees that her date at Gino's has spaghetti sauce around his mouth. She picks up a napkin and says, "I really like the feel of these starched cloth napkins, don't you?" What she means is "Pick up your napkin and wipe the spaghetti sauce off your mouth!" It's far more gracious. So the man with leprosy

did not make a direct request of Jesus. He just stated a fact, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” I’m not asking you for anything. I am just telling you something about you that relates to me. You do with this statement what you will.

Lord, if you will, you can make me clean. What great faith he had! The issue was never about Jesus’ power. The leper acknowledged that Jesus had power no one on earth had. He could heal leprosy. He could make the unclean accursed outcast into a member of normal community once again. Lord you can. I know you can. There’s no question. Disease obeys you. You are the Lord.

If you will. How big is that little phrase! *If you will.* If it’s not too much trouble. If you could spare the time. If it should please you. If you had a mind to. If you were interested in me. If you regarded my life as worth a moment’s attention, this would be a very little thing to you.

The question of the willingness of Jesus is urgent for all of us. Especially at the point of our greatest shame and deepest need. We might imagine that Jesus is willing to be with us when we are being good. When we are doing our Bible study or serving in a mission. When we are writing a check or being nice to someone. Sure, I imagine Jesus is willing to bless me when I am on the road of serving him. But I’m not so sure he’s willing to be with me in those back streets of the soul. Let’s think about a few of them.



The Dark Alley. There’s a hidden alley I walk. On it, I’m willing to kick starving animals in my way or spit on begging old ladies just because they annoy me. I don’t even know why I have that meanness deep in my bones but it’s there. If the veneer of being civilized were peeled back just a bit, you and I would do anything.



The Back Room. There's a back room where I bring out my jealousies and look at them. I spool out my resentments. Like a boy getting out his army men, I put these people on the little table in my mind and flick at them. I knock them over and crush them with my anger.



The Cramped Cage. There's a cage I'm locked in. I can hardly turn around. I can't get out of that cage because it's made of my little boy fears of being embarrassed by my wants. Or called a big baby. Or rejected as inappropriate. I hear the taunt, "You're just a little boy who wants everybody to love him and call him special." Sometimes like a snarling, snapping tiger I go crazy inside this cage. I panic because someone is poking me, reminding me how easy it is to provoke the fear of exposure.



The Bed of Nails. There's a bed of nails on which I lie in the midnight hour. I try my best to pad that bed so I can sleep undisturbed. But sometimes the nails poke me awake. They remind me of what I have said. What I have done. And failed to do.



The Littered Lot. There's a huge empty lot littered with broken bottles and shreds of cans where I'm walking and never get to the end of it. I wander there when I wonder, "If they knew, if anyone knew, what's actually inside me would they ever let me live in normal human company again?"

Are you willing Jesus? How far down from heaven and onto our mean streets were you willing to go? What if I offer to you more than my safe sins or my acceptable faults? What if I *don't* say, "Lord, help me to be less busy, spend

more time with you and be more patient in traffic? If you are willing, you can make me nicer.” For the truth is we are not nice and we are not good. So what if I hold up my leprosy? What if I approach you with my secret shame and bring it into the light? What if I name the thing about me that seems totally unsolvable? What if I got right down to the heart of it and said, “I don’t even care if you fix my external problems, just make me acceptable again to you! Just make me able to relate to people without shame.”

Isn’t it fascinating that the leper didn’t say, “If you will, you can heal my skin disease?” The degeneration of his skin was not as bad as being cut off from the Lord’s favor. The pain of the disease was not as bad as the shame of being excluded from normal human company. Lord, you can make me *clean*. Accepted. Restored. Forgiven. I know, I know, the healing of the disease that made him unclean was necessary for him to be restored to ritual cleanness. But the leper’s statement tells us where the deepest pain was. We can endure most anything physically if we know that God forgives us and loves us and stays with us. We can take a lot of pain if we can have someone with us. Lord, are you willing to make me clean?

Jesus Stretched Forth His Hand



Luke tells us that Jesus *did* something before he *said* anything. First, he stretched out his hand. Now that’s not a way we usually talk today. We don’t say, “Honey, stretch forth your hand and procure for me the remote.” We say, “Could you grab the remote?” But it’s very important to realize that Luke is writing in a code. It’s a code that he wants us to crack. Jesus stretched forth his hand. Hey, you readers of the Hebrew Scriptures, this should sound like something. He stretched forth his hand. Oh! Yes! Like the LORD I AM who revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush. He told Moses that he had heard the cries of his people. He saw their suffering as slaves in Egypt and was going to set them free. The LORD said, “I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go” (Exodus 3: 20). The Jewish people repeated this promise every time they celebrated Passover. One of the four promises that went with the cups of wine was “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and mighty acts of judgment” (Exodus 6: 6) Stretching forth his hand means that God is intervening. He is judging evil and redeeming his people.

He is reaching out his hand to save. He is breaking the powers of rebellion and establishing the freedom and prosperity of his people. So think what Luke was saying in using this code phrase. Jesus stretched forth his hand. Jesus was God intervening in the world. He was breaking the power of evil; in this case he would break the power of disease. But even more, he would stretch forth his hand and save this leper from a lonely life of exclusion. He would restore him as clean and whole.

He Touched Him

Jesus stretched forth his hand and he touched him. Before he healed the leper, Jesus touched him. No one touched lepers. The skin diseases were contagious. Contact made you susceptible to disease. It also made you unclean like the leper. It would exclude you from the presence of the LORD and the company of his people. But Jesus touched him. He risked contact. Jesus took the leper's disease as his own. But somehow what happened is that disease didn't pass into Jesus. Rather Jesus' health passed into the leper. Uncleaness didn't taint Jesus. Because the leper was healed. The issue of contact became moot because the man was no longer a leper. He was clean. Normal. Healed. Jesus sent him to the priests to get certified so he could re-enter the normal world. Matthew reflects shortly after his version of the story that Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's words, "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases." He took our diseases and gave us his health.



What is this like? In 2012, Hurricane Isaac came straight up the mouth of the Mississippi River. The power of the storm was so great that for nearly 24 hours, the Mississippi River flowed backwards on itself. The Mississippi flows down at an average of 3500 cubic meters per second. For that day, the Mississippi flowed *upriver*, backwards, at 5200 cubic meters per second! Can you

imagine the power required to meet and then reverse that much water for a day? Jesus did it. He met, touched and reversed the flow of our curse. He turned decay back on itself with the power of his indestructible life.¹

Of course, this episode with the leper was just a foretaste. It wasn't the deepest encounter, or the final struggle with evil. But it certainly pointed to that. Leviticus said that the lepers had to live and die outside the camp. Excluded from people and from the presence of God in his tabernacle. Fast forward to the book of Hebrews, chapter 13. We read that Jesus also suffered outside the gates of the city, outside the camp. He went to the cross as the place of greatest reproach. He shed

his blood away from the place of the LORD, outside the community, rejected by those he came to save. Excluded, in those universe shattering moments, even by his Father. Until Easter came and his Father reversed even the flow of death into a stream of everlasting life that is still flowing towards us and transforming all who trust in Christ.

Jesus touched the leper while he was still unclean. He touched him *before* he declared him well. In Romans 5 we read, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...while we were yet his enemies, he reconciled us to God.” He didn’t go to the cross for people already cleaned up. He touched our leprosy while we still had it. He died for our sins while we are still sinners acting like his enemies.

This is God himself stretching out his hand to save his people. This is God’s judgment on sin: he takes it as his own. This is God’s confrontation with our mortal frailty: he touches it and heals it.

I Will; Be Clean!

And so Jesus spoke the meaning of what he had done. He gave the words that would heal the man’s mind and spirit just as his touch had healed his skin. “I will. Be clean.” He is willing. He touches us in the place of our shame. He draws us out of hiding. We feel attracted to the hope that we could be known thoroughly, and yet loved utterly. Though we tremble, we want him to see the leprosy. We want him to see the absolute worst of our uncleanness. The problem in the heart and soul that is worse than any infirmity we might suffer.

Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Jesus stretched forth his hand and touched him. I am willing. Be clean.

The power of God to stretch forth and save us is here. He wills your salvation. He wills your restoration to right relationship with him and one another. Go to him. Approach him. Offer him.

Pray to him. *Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.*

Hear his reply. Carry it about with you all week. Jesus words more precious than gold, *I will. I will. I will! Be clean!*

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-19435026>. 08/31/2012. The storm surge ahead of Hurricane Isaac made the Mississippi River run backwards for 24 hours. US Geological Survey (USGS) instruments at Belle Chasse in Louisiana recorded the flow of the river, finding it running in reverse on Tuesday. The flow reached nearly 5,200 cubic metres per second (182,000 cubic feet per second) upriver, with a height of nearly 3m (10ft) above average. Normal flow is about 3,540 cubic meters per second in the opposite direction.