

Mar 17 The Good Doctor

Luke 5:12-15

Most of us never ask ourselves the question, “Who wrote the gospel that we are studying during Lent?” It is called the Gospel of Luke and so we assume Luke wrote it! We need to realize that nowhere does the writer of this gospel and its companion, “The Acts of the Apostles” name him/herself. Tradition going back to the early church ascribes it to Luke, the traveling partner of Paul, called the beloved physician. There are some hints from “The Acts of the Apostle” that the writer is Luke. There are the famous “we” passages where, in describing some of Paul’s journeys, the narration moves to the first person and it seems to be Luke talking about events he experienced with Paul. One of the other clues is when it comes to the healing miracles of Jesus. Almost always, in describing the condition of the person to be healed, we get a much more detailed description of the illness than similar accounts from other gospel writers. We see that today in this story. He lets it be known that the man Jesus healed was covered with leprosy while Mark only states he has leprosy. Can you see the clinician in that description? I can.

Leprosy covered a host of skin diseases in Jesus day. This is why there were rules for isolation, until it was determined what type of skin eruption or rash the person had. This is also why there were rules for purification. True leprosy was incurable but many of the other rashes and boils could possibly clear up. If you were deemed to have leprosy, you were to wear torn clothing and have disheveled hair. You must live alone or with other lepers. When approached by another person the leper was to cover his or her upper lip and call out, “unclean.” You lived by begging and you placed your begging bowl down and walked back from it. Most assumed that a person got leprosy because of some great sin. It was a disease with physical, social and spiritual dimensions. You were left isolated and feeling as if God was punishing you.

With this context we now turn to this story of healing. It begins with the fact that Jesus was in the city. As we now know, this means that the leper was violating one of the rules he was to live by. He should not have been in the city. This shows that he was so desperate for a cure that he risked all to see Jesus. He could have been beaten,

stoned, even killed for being in the city. We don't know how he heard about Jesus. We don't know why he thought Jesus could heal him. What we do know is that he saw in Jesus a hope for new life. When he sees Jesus he humbles himself totally and says, "If you choose, you can make me clean." He has no doubt about Jesus' ability to heal him. He just questions whether or not Jesus will choose to do so.

Then Jesus does something amazing. He touches the leper and says, "I choose to." It's important to know that in Jesus' day, illness was not just physical—many people thought it was a sign of God's curse. Jesus' healing acts bore powerful witness to God's forgiveness and love, as well as God's power. One of the things I find interesting about this story is that when Jesus makes the leper clean, the term he uses could mean "forgiveness" as well as "healing." Jesus heals the man in a way that addresses the medical, cultural and religious questions the man had as well as the questions of all those who witness this event.

The healing changed both Jesus and the leper. In a symbolic sense, Jesus took the leper's uncleanness upon himself. In touching the leper, Jesus renders himself ritually unclean. Afterwards it says he goes to a lonely spot to pray. Was that why he went into the hills to pray or did he need to isolate himself for the prescribed time? Luke leaves the question open.

This story is about Jesus touching those things in our lives that cast us out, hold us back or isolate us in the darkness and he takes it upon himself. This story is the Gospel in miniature. Where do we need Jesus' touch? Where do you feel "unclean" wondering if Jesus would be willing to make you clean? This story says to us that Jesus is willing. He will touch us, become one with us, take our sin upon himself and forgive us and cleanse us.

This is the good news. Jesus came to free us from all that cripples, binds, and enslaves. He didn't come to support religious orthodoxy, ritual cleanliness or rule-following. His only concern was that we might have life and have it abundantly, and that is rooted in our ability to love God with everything we have and all that we are, and to love one another in the same way.

Lepers were kicked out, humiliated, and forced to out themselves and demean themselves wherever they went. Jesus was willing to touch them, to become one with them. It makes me ask, "Who do we need to see in a different light because of this story?" Where do we need to love without condition?

This is a story of compassion for those on the fringe. As we shared last week. Luke's Gospel focuses on the "nobodies" of the world. Luke's account of Jesus' life is a celebration of the goodness of all people, particularly those marginalized by society. Too often we don't see the possibilities in their lives. Too often we forget that God loves them as much as we are loved. When we do remember we tend to care for them from a distance. We write a check so others can do the caring for us. Now it is important to support the work of the food bank, the free clinic and other caring organizations. This story challenges us to do more. Perhaps it is working at our monthly dinner and sitting at a table of people you don't know and hearing their stories. I often do this and have heard amazing stories. Perhaps it is taking the time to talk to some of those who serve you, like people at the grocery store and find out how their day is going. If you ask with compassion you often hear more than the traditional "I'm good." This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Again, I want you to think about how this story is a reminder of our need to be healed. Every day we do things that are not the highest and best or don't do things that should be done as a follower. Often they are not big things but little moments where we say a nasty comment that should not be spoken, or refuse to think about forgiving because we want to be angry at the person, or we get a nudge to reach out and give some of our time to another and we just ignore it. These things can distance us from God, from others. Jesus wants us to come in humility and ask to be cleansed, which means forgiven and made whole. When we do, we find Jesus fully entering into our lives and taking on our struggles and sin.

Finally this is a reminder that we follow a God who is not repulsed by anything we have done. Every once in a while we have to be reminded of this for ourselves or one we love. Instead of what society says, or what we might be feeling, God loves us.

In closing let me share one story. It comes from a movie Jenny and I watched during the epic snow called "Duke." It is the story of a wounded Afghan vet and his dog. Because of his wounds and his PTSD, the veteran ended up walking away from his wife and 12-year-old daughter. He ended up living in an old motor home repairing things to earn a little money. The one stabilizing force in his life was his dog Duke. Duke got very sick and almost died. Heroic actions by a veterinarian saved him. But the veteran was so ashamed that he could not take care of Duke he had left him at the veterinarian and run away. He finally talked to a pastor friend and the tears flowed as he recalled how he always handled things by running away, from wife, daughter and now his beloved dog. He had tried to go by the vet to make sure Duke had died peacefully but couldn't do it. He felt unlovable. The veterinarian wanted to unite Duke with his owner and so started putting up fliers. The veteran's daughter saw one and recognized Duke. Finally she meets her dad who she had not seen in over a decade and together they go to see Duke. They finally talk about his leaving. He is so ashamed of what he did. He was not sure she wanted him to be a part of her life. She finally said, "You are my dad and I love you." And then she hugged him. That love put him on the road to emotional healing.

God says to each of us, "I love you. I want to make you clean. Let me touch you." This is the good news of our faith.