

Make Me Clean

Mark 1:40-45

Two older ladies were discussing their husbands over tea one day. The one lady said: *“I do wish that my George would stop biting his nails. He makes me terribly nervous.”* The other woman replied: *“My Bill used to do the same thing. But I broke him of the habit.”* *“How?”* asked the first woman. *“I hid his teeth.”*

Well, she cured him of his problem. But it was a somewhat drastic solution. You know, sometimes a drastic cure is absolutely necessary. So it was in our Gospel lesson for today – the story of the man with leprosy. His situation was so deplorable, that only a radical solution would help. After all, according to the Levitical Law, leprosy was not just a physical ailment, it also brought about ritual defilement. The person was considered unclean – so unclean that they had to be quarantined from the rest of the community, lest they contaminate others. They had to live alone, outside of town, forbidden to have contact with normal people. And they were especially forbidden to approach the tabernacle or temple.

In fact, the Law prescribed that a leper must wear torn clothing, leave his hair unkempt, and cover the lower part of his face as a stark warning of the infectiousness of his disease. And as if that weren't bad enough, he had to cry out: *‘Unclean!’* to anyone who passed by. In the Middle Ages it got so bad that the priest would actually speak the burial service over a leper, because he was considered to be dead, though still alive. And he had to wear a black garment, the color of death, so that everyone would recognize him as a leper.

Can you imagine the shame and humiliation, the desolate isolation this man in our text must've felt? Actually, perhaps you can. You see, the shame and humiliation of sin is not unlike the isolation of leprosy. It cuts us off from God, segregates us as unworthy, unclean lepers. For the deplorable nature of sin is that it's like a deadly disease that infects and contaminates everything it

touches. It defiles our soul, so that we feel dirty and unkempt in God's eyes. Have you ever experienced that? Perhaps it was a stinging remark you spoke, that you wished you could've taken back. But you couldn't. Maybe it was an impure thought, something so disgusting you wondered where in the world it even came from. It might've been a selfish behavior on your part, that afterwards left you feeling ashamed and embarrassed.

If so, then you know what the leper in our text felt like. You see, some forms of leprosy leave ulcerated sores that are repulsive to the leper as well as others. In other cases, the infected area loses all sensation, so that a leper can cut himself and not even know it – a very dangerous thing. But then, such is the insidious nature of sin. When we give in to lust and pride, jealousy and anger we can become repulsive to others and even to ourselves. But if we continue in it long enough, we can become so desensitized to the danger, that we need something to warn us of our plight.

The author of *Diversions Digest* writes: “*My father's hearing aid occasionally emits a brief high-pitched squeal that can be heard by anyone near him. One day my little niece was sitting on his lap when the device started to beep. Surprised, my niece looked up at him. 'Grandpa,' she said, 'you've got mail.'*” In a funny way, she thought the noise was warning him – warning him about an important message. Well, my friends that's exactly what God's Word does for you and me. It's like email or a text message from our Heavenly Father, warning us that we need to be cleansed. And like the leper in our text, we need to heed that warning. He knew that he needed a drastic cure to be made clean, and he wasn't going to let anything get in his way – not even the ceremonial law. The law said he could not come in contact with other people, but that didn't stop him from coming to Jesus, for he knew that only Jesus could heal him. So many people in our world today let their pride or their fear or their shame keep them from coming to Jesus. They think they can work out their problems on their own or get past

their sin by themselves. Maybe sometimes we ourselves play those games too.

But only Jesus can heal us. Only He can make us clean. The leper in our text knew that, and so he fell on his knees before the Lord and begged Him: “IF YOU WILL, YOU CAN MAKE ME CLEAN!” St. Luke says that he actually fell with his face to the ground – a sign of reverence before the Messiah, the Savior, the only One who could help him. And you’ll notice, he doesn’t just ask Jesus to heal him. He asks Him to make him clean, to purify him of his defilement.

And notice Jesus’ response. He didn’t shrink back in disgust. He didn’t turn away in apathy. Instead, our text says that He was filled with compassion for the man – so much so, that He reached out and touched him, even though He wasn’t supposed to. Jesus Himself broke the purity code. But in the process He did not become unclean. Rather, He remained clean and at the same time cleansed the leper too. In His compassion, He not only healed him. He removed His defilement as well.

Dear friends, His compassion is no less for you and me. In the defilement of our sin, He reached out His hand to heal us and make us clean – He reached it out all the way to Calvary, where it was nailed to the cross to save us. He took upon Himself the unclean defilement of our sin, and broke the curse and removed it for good. When He shed His blood to wash away all our sins, it was as if He spoke to us those same blessed words that He spoke to the leper in our text, the words He addresses to you and me today: “I AM WILLING! BE CLEAN!” Such is the compassion of Jesus our Savior.

One curious note, though: some early manuscripts of Mark’s Gospel have the word *anger* in place of *compassion*. In other words, that Jesus was moved with indignation at the man’s plight. If so, it reminds us of the righteous anger that Jesus has towards our enemies, sin, death and the devil, and the ravages which they inflict upon us, His people, which is why He fought them to the death and

conquered them for you and me. He excised them and wiped them out forever, so that they cannot accuse or condemn us anymore. The deadly infection of our sin has vanished as completely as the man's leprosy vanished!

That comes out clearly in our text, where Jesus told the man to go show himself to the priests. That was the procedure laid out in the Levitical law. And it was a very complicated process. First he was examined by the priest. Then two birds were taken and one was killed over running water. In addition, the priest took some cedar, scarlet and hyssop and these items, along with the living bird, were dipped in the blood of the dead bird. Then the live bird was allowed to go free. After that the man washed himself and his clothes and shaved himself. Seven days elapsed and he was re-examined. Once again he had to shave his head, his beard and his eyebrows and certain sacrifices were made – two male lambs without blemish, one ewe lamb, and three tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil. Finally, he was touched on the tip of the right ear, the right thumb and the right big toe with blood. And if he passed the last examination, he was allowed to go free with a certificate that he was clean!

Thankfully, our cleansing is nowhere near that complicated. Jesus cut through all the rituals and simply spoke the healing word of His forgiveness and made us pure. And He has given us a certificate that proves we are clean – the promise of our Baptism that He has washed us and made us whiter than snow. For whenever we come to Him in humble repentance and faith, He removes our defilement by His grace!

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, *The Birthmark*, tells the tale of a renowned scientist by the name of Aylmer, who wins the hand of a beautiful woman named Georgiana. Aylmer loves his wife very dearly, but becomes increasingly bothered by the one blemish to Georgiana's beauty – a birthmark on her cheek that looks like a tiny hand. As a matter of fact, Aylmer's growing obsession with the birthmark begins to so disturb the peace of their marriage that

Georgiana finally consents to surgery. However, Aylmer, a great and qualified authority, confident that he can remove the birthmark surgically, insists on performing the operation himself. The shocking conclusion of the story is that Georgiana dies on the operating table, due to Aylmer's lack of expertise!

According to Hawthorne, the moral of the story is man's driving compulsion to try and remedy his own flaws, yet his frustrating inability to do so. What a fitting description of our own spiritual plight. Like the leper in our text could not heal himself, so we cannot save ourselves from our sin. But Jesus can. Just as He cured the leper, so also He has cured you and me. In fact, the cleansing of the leper was so effective that our text literally says *his leprosy departed from him*. What good news for a leper. To someone, who was always being told to depart and leave, finally it was his sickness that had to go. And the same thing is true for you and me. Our sin has departed from us and we are clean, thanks to the blood of Jesus Christ. My friends, may that inspire us to share the cleansing with others, just like the leper. He couldn't help but tell people the good news of his healing. Even when Jesus warned him not to, he couldn't contain himself. God grant that we would do the same, by the power of His Holy Spirit. Amen.