



homily

atonement: the savior's unity and connectedness with us

a man full of leprosy

luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴ (part 2)

¹²*When he was in a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy: who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean."

¹³And he put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, "I will: be thou clean."

And immediately the leprosy departed from him. ¹⁴And he charged him to tell no man: but go, and shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing, according as Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.

Introduction

In this homily, we continue our examination of Luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴ with its account of Jesus' encounter with a leper. This passage is an example of atonement as connectedness as found in Jesus' earthly ministry.

In our first homily, we examined leprosy and the social and religious status of lepers as the Hebrew Bible understood them. According to the Hebrew Bible, the theology and culture of Jesus' day, and their view of God and His character, the unnamed leper that approached Jesus would have lived a life disconnected from God and man for however long the affliction had rested upon him. Contrary to our expectations, the Hebrew Bible stresses that the quarantining of lepers was less about the fear of physical contagion among mortals and more about the fear of offending and spiritually defiling both man and God, for leprosy was closely associated with sin.

Yet, even with this millennia-long tradition, the leper approached Jesus. This approach was the result of more than desperation. It was the result of the Leper's belief, acquired we know not how, that Jesus might be both holy and unorthodox enough that he would, against all tradition and religious convention and whatever public ridicule he might face, engage the leper.

Still, the leper's approach was tentative. The leper "fell on his face, and besought [Jesus], saying, 'Lord, if you want to, you have the power to cleanse me.'¹"

If you want to

Here, we wish to make a few observations about the leper's confession, "Lord, if you want to, you have the power to cleanse me." We call it a confession, for such it is. It is not presented in question form. The confession is such that we understand the nature and extent of the leper's "faith." By what means we do not know, but the leper came to believe that Jesus had the power to cleanse him. The belief in such a power is no trifle. Individuals had been suffering under the pains and stigma of leprosy as far back as history is recorded. Leprosy had been a stubborn foe of humanity that brought in its wake great societal and religious stigma.

While the leper seems to harbor little doubt about Jesus' *capability*, he did possess doubt about Jesus' *willingness* to cleanse: "If you want to..." And this is exactly where the rubber hits the road. What good is someone's capabilities if they refuse to use them out of a lack of desire? The leper seems to have considered the possibility that Jesus *could* cleanse him, but, for reasons we have already discussed, might not be *willing* to help him.

Our translation makes clear what the King James translation can, if the reader is not careful, obscure. The English "will" of the KJV is not to be confused with the English future "will" as in "shall." The English "will," found here, as our translation makes clear, is the "will" of "desire," "inclination," "willingness," "wanting." Indeed, there is nothing of the future found in the leper's confession. The verb is present tense. The leper is looking for immediate

¹ Author's translation.

cleansing in the present moment.

We should note, too, that the leper is looking for “cleansing,” not “healing.” Now, it is true that in the case of the leper the two are almost synonymous. But we should consider the possibility that the text reads “cleanse” rather than “heal” because the man’s suffering was predominantly emotional and spiritual rather than physical. He was less interested in having clear skin than in reconnecting with others, with society, and, especially, with God. In asking to be cleansed rather than healed, the leper demonstrates that his priorities are spiritual and focused on God and his relationship with Deity.

I do want to

Jesus’ response to the leper’s confession was, “I do want to. Be clean.”

I don’t know of any bigger three-word affirmation than this: “I want to.” Jesus WANTED to cleanse the leper. He DESIRED to cleanse the man. This is a profound statement of character. It is a profound statement about the kind of being Jesus was and is and, through association, the kind of Being God is. Jesus and his Father WANT to be there for others. They wish to engage with others in ways that heal, cleanse, and advance. They are willing participants in the unclean life of the confessing and importuning sinner.

This “wanting” to help and be there for others is indicative of connectedness, association, attachment, at-one-ment. But, this connected wanting is only one indication of Jesus’ at-one-ment with the leper. Just as powerful is the manner in which Jesus expressed his “wanting” and “willingness.” That will be the subject of our next homily.

Conclusion

A man with the most extreme case of leprosy, and thus deep spiritual uncleanness surprisingly and faithfully approach Jesus in hopes of being cleansed, being given reentry into polite society and into a renewed relationship with God. How he can to this faith, we do not know. His faith was such that he believed Jesus had the power, the capability to heal him. He was, however, unsure of Jesus’ willingness to heal him. Healing him would mean some

type of entrance into his life—however brief. Jesus might view this as a threat to his own cleanliness and reputation as so reject him. The Hebrew Bible and God’s relationship with lepers gave him every reason to fear Jesus’ response.

Was the man surprised when Jesus replied, “I do want to”? “I am willing”? I don’t know. But I have no doubt that many were. I know that even after reading the narrative many, many times, I still feel the wonder of it all every single time. In engaging with the leper, Jesus formed an attachment, and connection, and unity with the leper; with a confessing and importuning sinner.

Like the leper ,we often believe and boldly proclaim our belief in Jesus’ power to do good and positively affect those into whose lives he enters and acts. But this is only half the truth. At the same time that we believe in his capabilities, we are often unsure of his desires and whether he wants to enter in willing to our lives, messy as they are, and act. John Calvin, one of the great discerners of the workings of the religious mind, put it like this.

“There are very many who so conceive God’s mercy that they receive almost no consolation from it. They are constrained with miserable anxiety at the same time as they are in doubt whether he will be merciful to them because they confine that very kindness of which they seem utterly persuaded within too narrow limits. For among themselves they ponder that it is indeed great and abundant, shed upon many, available and ready for all; but that it is uncertain whether it will even come to them.... This reasoning, when it stops in mid-course, is only half. Therefore, it does not so much strengthen the spirit in secure tranquility as trouble it with uneasy doubting. But there is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith....

“There is no right faith except when we dare with tranquil hearts to stand in God’s sight. This boldness arises only out of a sure confidence in divine benevolence and salvation.

“Here, indeed, is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather that we make them ours by inwardly embracing them. Hence, at last is born that confidence

which Paul elsewhere calls ‘peace’... Now it is an assurance that renders the conscience calm and peaceful before God’s judgment. Without it the conscience must be harried by disturbed alarm, and almost torn to pieces.”²

The leper reminds us that Jesus is more than capable and that his capabilities know no bounds. But he also WANTS desperately to use them for our benefit, unclean as we are. It is not so much his capabilities that ties him to us, drives him to be connected and unified with us. It is his *wanting* that most powerfully testifies to his connectedness, his at-one-ment with us.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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² (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I, Book III, p. 561).