



## homily

atonement: the savior's unity and connectedness with us

a man full of leprosy

luke 5.<sup>12-14</sup> (part 3)

<sup>12</sup>\*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."

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

And immediately the leprosy departed from him. <sup>14</sup>And 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

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In this homily, we continue our examination of Luke 5.<sup>12-14</sup> with its account of Jesus' encounter with a leper. This passage is an example of atonement as connectedness, attachment, linkage, and unity 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 been made to live 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, it was believed, was closely associated with sin. God could and would have nothing to do a leper, or so the doctrine held.

In our second homily, we saw that in spite of this millennia-long tradition, a man covered with leprosy 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. While the leper was not certain of Jesus' willingness, he seems to have had some degree of certainty about Jesus' capacity to cleanse him: He "fell on his face, and besought [Jesus], saying, 'Lord, if you want to, you have the power to cleanse me.'<sup>1</sup>"

Jesus responded, "I do want to." "I am willing."

Now, we must have a closer look at exactly how Jesus cleansed the leper. His manner of cleansing serves as an example of Jesus' connectedness with the leper—the at-one-ment between Jesus and leper.

touched him

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Jesus, we are informed, "put forth his hand, and touched him." We first consider the word, "touched." What do you see when you close your eyes and imagine seeing Jesus "touch" the leper?

The King James' "touch" does not begin to describe the level of engagement and connection—at-one-ment—that Jesus formed with the leper. It is not intimate enough. It is not sustained enough. It is not committed enough. It is not faithful enough.

We translate, "He extended his hand and *laid hold* of him.' The Greek word that the King James Bible translates "touch" and that we translate as "lay hold of" is *apto*. It means "to fasten onto," "to engage," "to take part in," "to join," "to set upon." This word describes, for example, the "touching" that goes on between two wrestlers. It also describes the "touching" that goes on between a loving husband and wife during sexual intimacy. Both circumstances involve a considerable degree of "touching." This touching is not brief. It is not stealthy. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Author's translation.

sustained and intimate.

When we envision Jesus touching the leper, we should not envision a quick poke with the finger, a brief hand to the shoulder, or even the momentary laying on of a hand to the leper's head. No! We should envision an embrace—an extended embrace that no one present could possibly have missed. This “touch” speaks volumes. It speaks volumes about Jesus' character, Jesus' revelation about God, and Jesus' revelation of God's at-one-ment.

Obviously, to touch and, more, embrace someone is to form a literal and physical connection with and to them. For however long a touch lasts, a touch literally connects two people. They are attached, connected, and linked together. Through a touch, they become one mass—indeed, with Jesus hugging the leper, gravity would work on them as if they were one. It is entirely consistent with the meaning of the word to say that they are in a state of at-one-ment. By physically touching the leper, Jesus was, for as long as the embrace lasted, physically connected to, attached to, linked and at-one with the leper. Jesus' act of touching the leper is as much an act of atonement as any act in which Jesus ever engaged.

There is no telling how long it had been since the leper had experienced a loving human touch. But the engagement, the connectedness, the at-one-ment of Jesus' touch went well beyond the physical. As Jesus physically laid hold of the leper, he also became one with him emotionally and spiritually. Jesus took part in the leper's leprosy. He became one with the leper, his sickness, and the attending uncleanness, suffering, guilt, and self-doubt. Jesus set upon his leprosy, seized it, and removed it. There was a kind of physical and emotional transference, as it were, of the man's leprosy and uncleanness to Jesus.

## Conclusion

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Jesus is known to have healed individuals with a simple word. He is even known to have heal from a distance. But Jesus' healing of the leper was intimate. It involved physical contact. This, we submit, was purposeful on Jesus' part. There was a prohibition about touching lepers. The prohibition of humans touching lepers corresponded to God's supposed unwillingness to participate in the leper's life or in the life of one made unclean by sin.

Jesus' intimate and unmistakable touch of the leper was intended to send an unmistakable message. It intended to shatter the misapprehension and misunderstanding about God. As God's revelation of Himself to the world, not only was *Jesus* willing to *heal* the unclean and *engage* with the unclean even as their uncleanness rested so heavily and so thoroughly upon them, but so was God, Himself. In do so, and in engaging the confessing and importuning sinner, Jesus revealed a God who comfortably and willingly formed connection, attachment, and unity with confessing and importuning sinners. Jesus revealed a God of at-one-ment.

Oh, it is wonderful, wonder to me!<sup>2</sup>

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

*(edition: December 9, 2024)*

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<sup>2</sup> See LDS hymn, "I Stand all Amazed."