

Matthew 8:1-4
 The Third Sunday after Epiphany
 26 January 2014
 Luther Memorial Chapel and University Student Center
 The Rev. Jason D. Lane

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST. The text is from the Gospel Lesson, Mt 8:1-4.

1] LARGE CROWDS WERE FOLLOWING JESUS, 2] WHEN A MAN WITH LEPROSY CAME AND KNELT IN FRONT OF HIM AND SAID, "LORD, IF YOU'RE WILLING, YOU CAN MAKE ME CLEAN."

3] JESUS REACHED OUT HIS HAND AND TOUCHED THE MAN. "I'M WILLING," HE SAID. "BE CLEAN!" INSTANTLY, HE WAS CLEANSED FROM HIS LEPROSY. 4] THEN JESUS TOLD HIM, "BE CAREFUL NOT TO TELL ANYONE. BUT GO, SHOW YOURSELF TO THE PRIEST AND OFFER THE SACRIFICE THAT MOSES COMMANDED, AS A TESTIMONY TO THEM."

It's horrible. It's disfiguring. It spreads from person to person. It's fatal. I'm talking about sin. You thought I was talking about leprosy, but then, they're so much alike. It eats you alive; it disfigures you; it turns you into something people could HIDE THEIR FACES FROM, and leaves you outcast and alone. And now I'm talking about leprosy, though I could be talking about sin, which is why God uses the lesser disease, leprosy, as a picture of the worse disease, which is sin, where the face may be fair, but the sinful nature inside looks SCARCELY HUMAN, not healthy human, not normal human, not the way He made us to be. You get a picture of the way He made us to be in that passage of Law we just heard from Romans: LOVE MUST BE SINCERE – like His love, and REPAY EVIL WITH good, the way He does, and all the rest, like Him who is really healthy. That's what makes the Law so beautiful: It shows you what it's like to be well.

On the other hand, the Law shows you where you're diseased. You find out

there in the mirror of His Law how badly you need His grace that can heal you. But how bad is it, really? I suppose it's easy to say you need His grace when we're doing well, at least in our own eyes. Then it's easy to believe that His GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR somebody not all that bad. But when I'm doing worse, at least in my own eyes, when what's inside breaks out where not even I can pretend I don't see it, then it's hard to say, "Thank God for grace!" It's hard to say, "Thank God for His Holy Absolution!" Because it feels like I've got no business coming close to Him at all.

The Law says I'm right about that. The beautiful Law says, WHO MAY ASCEND THE HILL OF THE LORD? WHO MAY STAND IN HIS HOLY PLACE? HE WHO HAS CLEAN HANDS AND A PURE HEART.

But for spiritual lepers, the Law says, DEPART FROM ME! The Law says, THROW HIM OUTSIDE IN THE DARKNESS, in quarantine forever and ever. Which means that spiritual leprosy really is worse than the physical kind, although it was bad enough for that guy who came to Jesus. It was bad enough for him when he'd been examined naked and they'd found the damning lesion, and he heard the priest tell him, "It's leprosy. You have to leave. Now. It's God's Law. From now on, you live in quarantine way outside any towns. If anybody healthy gets near you, you start shouting, 'Unclean! Unclean!' to warn them off. And you, you never approach anybody healthy; you never come anywhere near them as long as you live."

I know we can say – maybe that poor man said it – "It's only a little bit of leprosy." I know we can say, as that poor man might have said, "I'll be better! I'll be better!" But God's Law examines us like a strip search of every inch of our lives. Just that little passage from Romans: The Law says, there MUST BE LOVE and LOVE MUST BE SINCERE. If I don't love some Christian, or if I smile at them and don't love them in my heart, the Law says, "That's leprosy." If I don't HATE whatever's EVIL, if I don't CLING TO WHAT'S GOOD, that's leprosy. If you're not DEVOTED to the ones Christ has redeemed, or if we won't HONOR one another above ourselves, or if we lose our SPIRITUAL FERVOR to SERVE THE LORD, the Law says, "Unclean. Unclean. Unclean." Or any of the beautiful

things God's Law demands in that passage: If we're not PATIENT IN SUFFERINGS, or not FAITHFUL IN PRAYER, or not sharing WITH GOD'S PEOPLE WHO ARE IN NEED – it's a disease that's eating us alive. Or if we want to get even with people instead of blessing them regardless: God's Law says you're diseased, disfigured, unclean and fit only for Outer Darkness.

You'll forgive me for being so brutal. It's just that I'm afraid. I'm afraid that, sometime, when you get hit with the reality of your particular sins, you'll say, "But my sin is worse than what Pastor was talking about." This pastor just called you a leper. What's worse than that? Beloved, nothing can be worse than what God's Law is already shouting. But how can I live if I look at myself like that? You can't; I can't. Therefore, look at somebody else instead. Let me look at somebody besides me. Let yourself look at Somebody who's well, Somebody healthy, HE WHO KNEW NO SIN. Let us go to Jesus, even when His Law says we've got no business coming.

V. 1-2] LARGE CROWDS WERE FOLLOWING JESUS, WHEN A MAN who was being eaten alive, a disfigured man, ONE FROM WHOM PEOPLE HIDE THEIR FACES – A MAN WITH LEPROSY CAME TO JESUS. What did the CROWDS do? Scream? Run? What did the CROWDS say? It *was* against the Law. And God knows that MAN knew it, but he CAME TO JESUS, and if him, then me. If him, then you. He came because there wasn't anywhere else to go, because he was unclean and dying of it and something bigger than God's Law was there. God was there.

And that MAN CAME AND KNELT IN FRONT OF HIM – face on the ground, AND he SAID, "LORD." He said, "LORD!" He said, "LORD, IF YOU'RE WILLING, YOU CAN MAKE ME CLEAN."

The CROWDS must have been filled with horror. But Jesus was filled with compassion. He gave the Law in the first place because He was filled with compassion. He sent the Law with its horrible diagnosis so that we'd come for the cure. And once His Law has done its work, He's filled with compassion all the more when He sees me coming, and coming wretched, and all the more because

spiritual leprosy is worse than the physical kind; all the more because I've consented to the infection. When you are unlovely in your eyes and rightly so, Jesus is filled with compassion. And while the Law of the Lord says, "Go away!" the LORD Himself says, WHOEVER COMES TO ME I WILL NEVER TURN AWAY. The promise is greater than the commandment. And where else can I go? And who else would be so glad to see me come?

V. 3] JESUS REACHED OUT HIS HAND to somebody crawling with disease and for once St. Peter didn't say, FAR BE IT FROM YOU, LORD!" He didn't say, "Lord, You're not going to touch that! Lord, are You WILLING to get infected so he can get clean? Are You WILLING to get driven out, outcast until You die all alone, just so he can go home again? Are You WILLING to BEAR HIS GRIEFS AND CARRY HIS SORROWS? Look at him!" Jesus would say, "I am looking at him." Jesus did say, "I AM WILLING."

JESUS REACHED OUT HIS HAND AND HE TOUCHED HIM. And He said, "You BE CLEAN." But that's just a picture. Jesus didn't get leprosy. No, when God touched us, He caught something worse.

BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD, WHO CARRIES the leprosy OF THE WORLD. By the time He was nailed up outside, outside the town, HIS FACE WAS SO DISFIGURED, HE SCARCELY LOOKED HUMAN, every secret ugliness in us was right out there on the surface of Him, LIKE ONE FROM WHOM MEN HIDE THEIR FACES, like a leper. The Law must be obeyed. And it has been. Christ, covered with all our sin, heard the Law say, "Go away!" And alone on the cross in Outer Darkness, Jesus cried out, UNCLEAN! UNCLEAN! —instead of me. UNCLEAN! UNCLEAN!—instead of you. To warn us away till it was over. Now it's over. HE WHO KNEW NO SIN WAS MADE SIN FOR US — what was He crawling with? Whatever sin! Whatever guilt! HE WHO KNEW NO SIN WAS MADE SIN FOR US, SO THAT WE WOULD BE MADE THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD. What does that mean?

Sin fills the world, but the world's just a little ball. There's no limit to the grace of God. He has caught our disease and drowned it in the depths of His

Righteousness, in the depths of the of baptismal water. You've died, and now are alive in His Righteousness that roars like a clean, high wind from His bright, empty tomb for you, that rushes like a river from His shining scars for me and anybody who'll come.

V. 3] JESUS SAID, "BE CLEAN!" INSTANTLY, that man WAS CLEANSED OF HIS LEPROSY. The Law couldn't tell him, "Go away" anymore. But every repentant sinner who kneels to Jesus gets a bigger miracle for a worse disease. We live in a huge and constant miracle with Jesus, where we've got no business being or kneeling before Him, where we don't deserve to be at all, and Him constantly REACHING OUT HIS HAND TO TOUCH US. How does He TOUCH US? He say by My Word and Sacraments, I will enter in. I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, He says. Him in us and us in Him: We live in that high, clear wind, CLEAN and pure. We live in that bright rushing river, CLEAN and CLEAN again. It hardly seems legal. It's not legal. YOU'RE NOT UNDER LAW, YOU'RE UNDER GRACE.

Especially when you know you haven't done well, no, not at all, and His righteousness is SUFFICIENT, if only you could see His righteousness on you, but you can't. So see it on Him. Look at Him: there's everything His beautiful Law ever demanded, and that's what covers you. Look at Him so healthy, so altogether well, everything a human being ought to be – that's what covers you. And WE SHALL BE LIKE HIM. In His eyes, we're like Him now.

Which is why He can tell us what He told that man, once He'd cleansed him. V. 4] Once He'd cleansed him, JESUS TOLD HIM, "GO, SHOW YOURSELF TO THE PRIEST. Go, show yourself to that priest! AND OFFER what MOSES COMMANDED, AS A TESTIMONY TO THEM." Jesus sent him back to the Law with nothing to be scared of any more. And once He's cleansed us, Jesus sends us back to the Law, and the Law can't tell us, "Go away," any longer. Jesus sends us back to His beautiful Law CLEAN and with nothing to be scared of anymore.

To learn to LOVE SINCERELY, to HATE WHAT'S EVIL AND CLING TO

WHAT'S GOOD, DEVOTED to our fellow believers, and HONORING them above ourselves, SERVING THE LORD, PATIENT IN SUFFERINGS, FAITHFUL IN PRAYER, SHARING WITH GOD'S PEOPLE WHO ARE IN NEED, BLESSING our enemies, like Him, with Him, and us already covered with everything the Law ever wanted, to begin to do what His Law commands AS A TESTIMONY, AS A pure TESTIMONY, AS A witness TESTIMONY that, yes, the Law is great, but that Somebody greater than the Law has touched us and makes us CLEAN. In the Name of Jesus + Amen.

Prayer of the Church

In peace, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the gift of divine peace and of pardon, with all our heart and with all our mind, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the holy Christian Church, here and scattered throughout the world, and for the proclamation of the Gospel and the calling of all to faith, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For this nation, for our cities and communities, and for the common welfare of us all, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For seasonable weather and for the fruitfulness of the earth, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who labor, for those whose work is difficult or dangerous, and for all who travel, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For all those in need, the hungry and homeless, for the widowed and orphaned, and for all those in prison, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the sick and dying and for all those who care for them, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For Don and Cheryl, and all husbands and wives, that they may be encouraged and blessed in their marital vows, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those that are vulnerable and in need of justice, especially the living but unborn, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those in our congregation that have been sick or hospitalized, for Winnie, Lisa, Darice, and Carl, that the Lord would visit them and give healing according to His mercy, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

In thanksgiving for the length of years given to Flo, that the Lord would keep her in the baptismal faith, and finally bring her to Himself at the proper hour, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For a worthy reception of Christ's holy body and blood and for great joy in the forgiveness of sins, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the faithful who have gone before us, let us give thanks to God and ask Him to bring us with them to the unending feast in His Kingdom, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**