

Fr. Jim Willig Gospel Study - *Healing Power of Love*

Gospel - Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to Jesus and kneeling down begged him and said,
"If you wish, you can make me clean."

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand,
touched him, and said to him,
"I do will it. Be made clean."

The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean.
Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once.

He said to him, "See that you tell no one anything,
but go, show yourself to the priest
and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed;
that will be proof for them."

The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter.
He spread the report abroad
so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly.
He remained outside in deserted places,
and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

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Recently, a woman approached me and inquired, "Why is it, that when we read so much and so often in the Gospel where Jesus heals all the sick, that the church or you, never heal anybody?" Okay, I said, I guess it should be obvious, there's just a big difference between Jesus and me. I thought I was off the hook, but she didn't let up so easily, she said, "Yeah, but didn't he instruct and empower his disciples to continue his healing ministry?" I was uncharacteristically silent. I didn't know what to say. What would you say? Keep that question in mind as we study this wonderful miracle story of the healing of the leper.

This remarkable miracle becomes even more powerful if we are to take a moment to understand some of the background—some of the social context—of this dreaded disease called leprosy in the time of Christ. First, just a word about what scholars suggest today. They presume that leprosy noted in the Gospel is not the Hansen's disease that we know leprosy to be today. It was just as much an awful kind of skin disease, or even possibly cancer, that disfigured a person in some way and left them feeling completely ostracized. Our ancestors of faith believed that any imperfections were contradictory to true holiness. Which is to say, they understood holiness not only to be a spiritual condition, but also a physical wholeness.

Therefore, in the book of Leviticus (the fourth book of the Bible) we can read about religious or ritual purity. It states that any kind of skin blemish makes a person "ritually unclean." Leviticus ordered such a person—who would have what we can now call biblical leprosy, that is any

Fr. Jim Willig Gospel Study - *Healing Power of Love*

blemish on a person's body—"to live alone and have their dwelling place outside of the camp." It's almost impossible for today to fully appreciate the impact of this judgment. In Mediterranean cultures, the family and community meant everything. If someone was ostracized, or literally excommunicated from the community, it would be the kiss of death. They would lose not only contact with their family and friends, but they would lose access to their source of life; their source of sustenance. The entire economy was based on its interconnectedness. In other words, such a person would often die in from such seclusion. They would be like a fish out of water.

Moreover, the book of Leviticus stipulated that any such person with leprosy needed to avoid all contact with other people in the community. If a leper were walking down the street and met someone (even 20 yards away) he or she would need to cry out "Un-clean! Un-clean!" so that the other person would not be polluted. That was the awful mentality about leprosy in that time.

As we look to the Gospel then, it is truly amazing that this particular man, scarred with the dreaded disease of leprosy, dares to ignore this religious restriction, and cries out for healing. He breaks through that distance that kept him from community to come to Christ and in the most dramatic way, he falls down on his knees. What a beautiful posture of humility and sincerity by which he cries out with tremendous faith, "Lord if you will to do so, you can cure me!" What tremendous faith is stated in that simple phrase: "If you will to do so, you can cure me." We're told that Jesus was moved with pity and stretching out his hand, touched him saying, "I do will it. Be cured." The leprosy left him then and there and he was cured.

First, we look at that very loaded sentence: "Jesus was moved with pity." He was moved by the terrible sense of separation that this poor man endured through no sin of his own. Yet, the implication was, he brought it on himself—that was the mentality back then. Jesus knew how wrong that was and so Jesus crossed over that barrier of fear. He crossed over that barrier of separation and he literally got in touch with the man. He said to him, "I do will it. Be cured." You can hear Christ crying out with everything in Him; how the Lord hates to see suffering. It assures us of Jesus' tremendous compassion and it's that compassion, that oneness with those suffering, that made Him want to heal people. More important than the words of Jesus, is the very action that speaks louder than words: *He stretched out his hand and touched him.*

Don't miss this obvious point: The lepers were the untouchables, the unlovable people of Jesus' day, and Jesus crossed to the other side to be in solidarity with the man—to join in his community of outcast people and to be one with him. He literally and completely came in touch with him and with that source of sickness that was more than the man, it was in all of the society, and he overcame it with the power of his healing love. If we understand that marvelous action of Jesus, maybe we can begin to answer the question the woman asked of me, "Why don't we heal people?" How can we carry on this ministry of loving, accepting people who find themselves ostracized or alienated in some way.

For our reflection of this Gospel, I thought would share a story of a young man who resembles more than anyone I've ever met, this man with leprosy. Some years ago, when I was at St. George Parish, I met Tim. Tim was in his young 30s and had recently learned that he had

Fr. Jim Willig Gospel Study - *Healing Power of Love*

contracted the dreaded AIDS disease. I remember meeting him and thinking, even then, that there is probably no other modern equivalent to the leprosy of yesterday than AIDS. It has so many moral connotations and carries a sense of alienation and a sense of fear that is provoked by the contagion of the disease, leaving people feeling so isolated.

That was the case with Tim. His family had rejected him years ago because of his homosexual orientation. He also felt that same alienation from the Church for much the same reason. Knowing he had AIDS, he was terrified when he was first brought to the hospital with a critical case of pneumonia for, you know, he had no immunity to fight off the sickness. He described for me a time that he was lying in bed, shivering with cold, staring at death which was knocking at the door, and not knowing what in the world to do or to whom he could turn. He desperately looked up to heaven and cried the most sincere prayer for Jesus to come and save him.

Tim mentioned that he hadn't prayed for what seemed years. He'd almost felt he had lost his faith, just as he had seemed to lose so much faith in others and himself. But now, crying out to Jesus at this desperate time, he said he immediately felt a certain presence enter the room. There wasn't any person. It wasn't anything physical, but a spiritual presence and peace that came over him. He described it, "like a blanket" that immediately sent his shivering body to rest. Something settled deep inside of him, like he knew there was a spiritual power entering into him. Then he heard the clear voice speak inside of him—which he immediately recognized to be Jesus, whom he had just cried out to—say to him, "Tim, come back to me. Come back to the Church." Just as Jesus had said to the leper, when Jesus' reached out to touch him, Jesus said to Tim, "and go, see a priest." Tim made an incredibly quick recovery and a day later was released from the hospital and went immediately to St. George Parish which was just a few blocks away; I was so blessed to be at the door when he arrived. Mind you, he hadn't been to church, much less a rectory for maybe 20 years.

He came in to my office, sat down, and told me this powerful story of how Jesus had reached out to him, and touched him with His love. Now I wish I could say that Tim was physically healed, but he was not. I'm happier to say he was spiritually healed and made whole. In such a dramatic way, Tim became a faithful parishioner. More than that, he went on to speak to many other people who also were HIV-infected about the serenity that the Spirit of God alone can offer.

Tim suffered a very hard death. He became quite emaciated, almost like a skeleton, and then went blind, lost his mental faculties, and then died. All the while he was losing his body, I felt he was gaining a new life. I had this sense of that presence of Jesus, that stayed with him through it all. I will never forget, celebrating Tim's Mass of resurrection at St. George Church where he returned, saying with some confidence that now Jesus had completed his healing and had given him a whole new life.

Just as reading this Gospel reminds me of Tim, perhaps you might be reminded of someone. They might be suffering in a less dramatic way or from a less obvious sickness. Or even within ourselves, I suspect that deep inside of us—we might not even be in touch with it ourselves—there might be something we consider unclean, impure, or on the ugly side of our personality. I

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wonder if that isn't the very part of us that needs to be healed, to be brought before the Lord. That person—or that person in us—needs to cry out to Jesus to love it to death.

Consider those among our family as well. Many or all of us are blessed with that certain strange person among our relations. Maybe it's that person, in their bizarre behavior, who in a strange way is crying out for our love, and our acceptance, and our healing. This Gospel urges us to get in touch with that person.

What about ourselves? How are we being challenged to put ourselves out, to sacrifice ourselves, to be with people who are hurting and needing our loving attention?

It may be that the woman was right to ask me, "Why aren't you able to heal?" How Jesus can use us if we are willing to get in touch with that wounded side of the body of Christ? If we are willing to be in touch with our own pain that unites us with the struggle of others, we allow the Lord to work His miracle among us. That's something to think about. My question is: How can this Gospel we have just read, happen again today through us and among us? Amen.