

Sermon Text for Sunday August 27, 2023

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Numbers 5:1-4, Matthew 8:1-4

“The unclean among us”

John Wesley once said: “I must preach law before I preach grace.” He meant that people need to come to an understanding that there is a standard which God sets for our lives and there are expectations and hopes and dreams that God has for our lives, and when we fall short of those, it is a result of sin. The presence of sin in all of our lives is a reality that we don’t dwell on much, and that honestly, I don’t remind us of much either. Even our phones want to avoid it. I tried texting someone yesterday that I was preaching about sin and it autocorrected three times to sun instead. It is hard addressing sin, it is much easier speaking about grace. I would rather focus on how Jesus saves the adulterous woman, than on his words when he tells her, go and sin no more.

Most of us live as if sin is an inevitable reality over which we have no power. We spend some time finding work arounds for our sin and we come up with neat slogans to make us feel better about our sin: We aren’t perfect, just forgiven. In our minds Jesus took care of that so we don’t have to really address it at all. As a result there is no sacrifice in our life, no cost, and ultimately, no real discipleship and following of Jesus and taking up the cross that he calls us to bear. We think being a part of this is all about a family that loves each other and supports each other, and rarely do we talk about how Jesus frees us from sin and so we should sin no more.

Prayer, Scripture, and Action is meant to increase our faith in Jesus and put us in a position where we rely more on Jesus than we do ourselves. But before we do are able to increase our faith our first step always has to be a recognition that we are and we remain sinners and our sin is what separates us from God. Before we quickly talk about a Savior, we need to spend some time recognizing that we deserve the full condemnation from God which is eternity in hell. I know, I said it, and I rarely say it, but I believe it so why don’t I say it? Because I like you and I want you to like me. But I love you and I don’t want anyone of us to think that because we attend church we don’t have to deal with our sin. We do, because it is sin which has put us individually in the state in which we find ourselves and as a society it is tearing us apart.

Our programs here at the church tend to be geared to create a family friendly atmosphere and feel where people are welcomed and are encouraged to get involved in the life of the church. We don’t spend time identifying the sin in each other’s life and as a result we do a good job of avoiding the sin of judgmentalism, remember, that means a habit of constantly finding fault in

what others do and say. But I wonder if we fully understand the implications of what it means to have a Savior, to be saved from our sin and what that means for our lives going forward as we avoid the sin that separated us from God originally.

Both of our Scriptures today address a physical malady, leprosy, that was understood as a manifestation of sin in a person's life. If you were leprosy you sinned before God and you were being punished as a result. The solution to this physical malady that was a result of your sin before God was to cast you out of the camp in the OT, the city in the New Testament, so that you can make your peace before God and then you will eventually get better. Jesus, as you would expect, approaches it very differently, he welcomes and touches and includes the leprosy fully recognizing that we have the unclean among us, and the unclean are actually each one of us. Let's read.

READ

There are two full chapters in Numbers that address leprosy and all of its implications. Leprosy was a whole variety of skin diseases from the actual leprosy that we call Hansen's disease, to psoriasis, to any other garden variety of skin problems from the most communicable to those that didn't spread at all. They just didn't have the medical knowledge to be able to differentiate between all of them so they called them leprosy.

Houses could also be leprosy and if the leprosy on the walls, probably what we would call mold, did not disappear after a certain amount of time the house would be torn down. For people, if they were leprosy you simply kicked them out of the camp or in Jesus' day out of the city. They were to cover their upper lip at all times and everywhere they went they were to call out: "Unclean!" loud enough for everyone to hear. If you happened to run across a leper and come into contact with them then that made you unclean and you had to go home and wash up and make yourself clean again.

There was a very complicated and time heavy process that took weeks and months with rituals and sacrifices in order for the leper, the unclean one, to be allowed back into the community once they had leprosy. And all of the decision making on when they were allowed back in was left up completely to the priests. If they felt like they could let you in, they let you in.

Leprosy was not considered just a physical disease. There was the added weight of sin being a part of the equation. It was assumed that they had leprosy as a result of some type of sin in their life. In fact, in order to be made clean again one of the rituals was a sin offering that had to be made in order to compensate for the sin in your life that caused you to get leprosy. So,

according to the law, the remedy for society when faced with someone who is unclean is to cast them outside of the village, outside of the community, outside of the fellowship.

As you can imagine, Jesus had a different way of working within that system, but he still worked within that system. We find ourselves in a transition now as we are in chapter 8 so the sermon on the mount is over, in fact, vs.1 tells us clearly that Jesus is descending from the mountain where he spent the last three chapters teaching the people all of his commandments and how to live a life that reflects that Jesus is your Savior, that you are indeed not just a Christian by name but by action. He spent three chapters of doing nothing but speaking, now it is time for him to act. And his first interaction that we find, remember, nothing happens by chance, is with a man outside of Capernaum, who is leprous.

It is important to understand that this man was a part of the community. He wasn't a Samaritan or a gentile, he was someone that would have been considered one of us, he's in the family. But he is leprous. And leprosy with all that we have already said about it is often referred to as a type of the original sin. It leaves the victim in a pitiable state, ostracized, helpless, hopeless, despairing. This cursed leper has no options until he meets Jesus.

I don't want you to miss the faith of this leper. He knows who Jesus is and he knows what Jesus can do. Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean. I know you can. He says this after he kneels before Jesus. Look at vs.2 where we see him kneeling. Turn to Matthew 2:11 and what do you find, you find the wise men kneeling before Jesus. These are the only two places in Matthew where we see this. Kings and lepers kneel before him. They all know who Jesus is and understand the power that he has to make them clean and to change their lives. They know it, if you only would Jesus, you can do it. I worship you in the midst of all my sin and I offer my life to you.

Jesus responds by doing what? Look at vs.3, he doesn't just touch him, he stretches out his hand, he makes the effort to approach him himself, and touches him. What did we say before what happens when you touch a leper? You become unclean yourself. Jesus here is fulfilling the words of Isaiah 53:4-5, let's read these verses: Jesus bore our diseases, our sin. People, I hope we understand the gravity of this. We do not deserve this. We deserve to suffer for what we have done to people, for the sin that separates us from God. We deserve to die as a result of the separation that we have from God because of our sin, not Adam's, but ours, it is ours and ours alone. But Jesus reaches out, stretches his arm as far as it could go, and even as we ran from him, he caught up to us and touched us, healed us, made us whole, because he carried our sins, our infirmities and made us whole.

We experienced a time in this country where we saw a certain group of people as being unclean. Some of you didn't live through the AIDS epidemic as we did in my generation. At the beginning of this there was so much confusion and so much bad information that you were told that you didn't want to get anywhere near anyone with AIDS, they were unclean. Now my Naomi is working on a vaccine for AIDS and there is medication that allows people with AIDS to live a fairly normal life. But there was a stigma and an assumption of sin that came along with it, and the church was complicit in this finger pointing assuming that it would never have the unclean among them.

This church is wired to reach out and touch those that society and culture consider as unclean, why? Because we have the unclean among us, and they are looking right back at you. Each and every one of us has fallen short of the glory of God and so as a result we are unclean and deserve to be cast out. But Jesus says no, I am going to take that away from you, now go, present yourself to the priest and show him what I can do. Present yourself to the world as a witness to the power of Jesus.

What happens with this leper at the end of these verses is a great example for each of us. Look at vs.4 where Jesus tells him to fulfill the religious obligations that he had. He doesn't tell him to stop going to church because you can do church better at home or in nature. He says go and be a witness. That term in the Greek is marturyon from which we get our word Martyr. This unclean person was entering the very place and seeing the very person who had all the power, according to society, to declare him clean. But Jesus had already immediately made him clean.

This outcast with his incredible confidence in Jesus is able to go because Jesus said he wanted to heal him. This is precisely the work of the Messiah: to restore the created order from its bondage to decay. Of course I want to do it, Jesus says. The very presence of Jesus is God's YES to all who suffer. As Jesus reached out to the leper, God in Jesus reaches out to all victims of sin. The leper was cured immediately with Jesus' words. This same Jesus cures people, the church, from the whole hurt of sin that surrounds us. It is Jesus' ultimate purpose to heal us from sin. Amen.