

Sermon: God Touches Everyone
Text: Mark 1:40-45
Date: February 15, 2009
Place: Jesup First UMC

The phone rang and a voice on the other end said: *"Pastor, this is Justina Kraque, the African lady who has been visiting your church. Would you please come see me?"* So I rang the doorbell and she opened the door and invited me in. I sat with her and listened to her story. She was from Liberia, Africa. Seven of her children still lived there and she had moved to Albany to live with her daughter who was a doctor a Phoebe Putney. After a few minutes, she said: *"Pastor, I want to join your church. Would that be okay?"* Man, was I excited. Two months out of seminary and my church was already growing.

So, the following Sunday, I stood at the altar during the closing hymn and Justina left her seat and walked down the aisle. Now, there were 250 people in church that day – 249 were white and there stood Justina, blacker than black. So, I introduced her and shared a little of her story and told them that she wanted to join the church. And most of the people smiled and nodded, but while she took the vows of church membership about 8 people got up and walked out.

You know, when the church is at its best, there is nothing – NOTHING – in all the world as beautiful. The church does more good than it gets credit for. The church saves broken marriages. The church helps abused women and children. The church feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and shelters the homeless. The church is an awesome, awesome thing. But when the church is not living up to the standards Jesus set for us, it leaves a

lot to be desired. Grandma used to say: *“Beauty is only skin deep, but ugly is ugly to the bone.”*

In Mark 1, we find another story from Jesus’ early ministry. Last week, we saw how Jesus left Capernaum and traveled throughout Galilee preaching and healing. And then, Mark says: **“One day a leper came to Jesus and knelt down in front of Him and said, ‘If you are willing, you can make me clean.’”** And Jesus reached out and touched the leper and said: **“I am willing; be made clean.”** And suddenly, as the man started walking away, he realized the leprosy was gone and Jesus told him not to tell anyone what had happened, but to show himself to the priest and make a sacrifice as proof of his healing. But instead, Mark says the man went out and told everyone he met Jesus had healed him. And soon, the story began to spread and Jesus became so popular that he couldn’t walk down the streets anymore without being mobbed by the people.

Now, when we look at this story, it looks like just another one of Jesus’ miracles – a healing story – but there’s much more to this story than that. For you see, this man had leprosy and leprosy was more than just a physical illness; it affected a person’s social life, emotional well-being, and spirituality too.

Modern medicine has taught us that leprosy is a bacterial infection that can be treated with anti-biotics, but in the first century, leprosy was a feared disease. First the infection attacked the nerve endings and when they die, lesions appeared on the skin. Then, gangrene set in and then, parts of the body began rotting away. Now, everyone was afraid that leprosy was contagious, so lepers were removed from society. They weren’t allowed

to see their families; they weren't allowed to go to the synagogue or to the Temple. They weren't allowed to go to the market to buy groceries or over to a friend's house for supper. Lepers were unclean and outcasts of society. They were seldom seen in public and if they happened to come around other people, they were supposed to shout to the crowd, "*Unclean! Unclean!*" And the crowd would part like the Red Sea. And so lepers lived in misery and loneliness. But on this particular day, a leper came to Jesus, begging to be cleansed and Jesus changed his life forever.

Now, I wonder if there might be something we could learn from this story, something that would change our lives, our church, our world.

1. JESUS CAN TOUCH AND TRANSFORM ANY SITUATION.

There's not a situation in your life too tough for Jesus. If He cared enough to touch the leper, then He'll touch the broken areas of our lives and bring about healing and wholeness too.

Many times, we feel unworthy to even approach God. I can't begin to tell you the number of times I've been told: "*You know, I just ain't good enough to go to church.*" Or "*maybe God would hear my prayers if I lived a better life than I do.*" But you know, I believe the only thing that stops God from working in our lives is us. God is willing and able to meet us at the point of our greatest need this morning. And all we have to do is bring those areas before His throne of mercy and grace and allow Him to touch them. The story of the cleansing of the leper assures us that

we're not untouchable. God is willing and able to touch our lives and to redeem every soul and circumstance.

2. JESUS HEALS COMPLETELY!

Notice: the leper didn't ask to be healed; his needs were deeper than physical healing. He needed a miracle of wholeness. So when Jesus touched him, He said: "*I am willing; be made clean.*" And by saying, "*Be made clean,*" Jesus brought about a complete restoration in his life. He was able to go home to his wife and children. He was able to walk down the street without being jeered at. He was able to go to the synagogue or the Temple for worship. His healing was complete.

You see, Jesus is concerned about more than just our physical healing. He's equally concerned about our emotional and mental healing, our spiritual restoration, and our social status too. When Jesus touches us, He touches every area of our lives. His work in us won't stop until the healing is complete. Jesus heals completely.

3. JESUS NEVER GIVES UP ON ANYONE!

A person who was discovered with leprosy was immediately removed from the community. And so, lepers usually lived together in leper colonies – out of sight and away from family and friends. And it was almost like the person was dead. There was no hope that daddy would be coming home after work. There was no hope that mama would celebrate my wedding or my birthday with me. Daddy was gone and he wasn't coming back. No way! No how! No hope! ... But Jesus ... Jesus never gives up on us.

The church gives up on a lot of people. The church has given up on Billy. Billy was just a worthless alcoholic, who hadn't been to church in 28 years. His name was read at Charge Conference and he was removed from church membership. Out of sight and out of mind. But God ... One night a visitation team visited Billy and his wife Mary and Billy made a promise, "*Preacher, I'm going to come to church one of these days.*" And one day, during the Prelude, the door opened and in walked old alcoholic Billy. And a few months later, old alcoholic Billy stepped out of his seat and walked down the aisle and knelt to receive Jesus as His Lord and Savior. The church gave up on Billy, but God ...

For years, Ruth came to church alone. While she was getting ready for church, Nelson sat in his chair watching westerns on television. There was a time when Ruth prayed: "*O God, change Nelson's heart. O God, please touch his life so that he'll go to church with me,*" but that was years ago. Ruth just gave up hope that Nelson would ever go to church with her. But God ... A team from the church started visiting Nelson and Ruth and one day, Nelson said: "*You know, one day you're going to look up and see me in church.*" But Ruth didn't believe it. And then one day, as Ruth stepped out of Sunday School on her way to the Sanctuary, Nelson was standing there with a big smile on his face. He took her hand and they walked to church together for the first time in years. Ruth gave up on Nelson; the church gave up on Nelson, but God ...

Oh it pains me how we give up on people. We put people into categories and we say these folks over here are reachable, but these aren't. It's the church that says:

“We don’t want that kind of people coming here.” Out of sight and out of mind. Most church folks don’t want anything to do with people who are different than we are. We don’t want certain races coming to our church. We don’t want those untouchables. We want people who look like we do and talk like we do, but God ...

When I was in youth ministry, I had a great group of kids. They were all middle class or upper middle class kids, except Ashley. Ashley didn’t have the money that the others had. Her clothes weren’t as new or as nice; her family’s car wasn’t new; their house wasn’t as modern or as pretty. And everybody knew it. Now, Ashley tried hard to be part of the group, but the rest of the kids always kept her at a distance. Oh they would speak to her, but they spent more time speaking about her than to her. And then, one day Ashley stopped coming and to my knowledge Ashley still hasn’t come back to church. And everybody gave up on Ashley. Out of sight and out of mind, but God ...

Friends, when will we understand God’s grace? When will we see the church as His Body, not our building? We are those who have been touched by Jesus and He touches the rich and the poor; He touches the young and the old; He touches the black, the white, the Hispanic, and the Asian. And if He touches them ... shouldn’t we touch them too?

The world might yell: “Unclean! Unclean!” but God ...