

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." ⁴¹ Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" ⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. ⁴³ Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: ⁴⁴ "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." ⁴⁵ Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere. (Mark 1:40-45)

Jesus has Compassion

About every other year, I show the older kids in our school a movie about Martin Luther. Late in the movie, Luther is teaching some children. He's talking about the famous story of the prodigal son and how the father runs to his son because he loves him. He says that there's a special name for the kind of love the father has for his son: compassion. Now, I don't know if that scene is based on anything specifically historical about Luther. But it raises the question: what is compassion? In the movie, Luther called it a kind of love. I often use that word to teach kids what God means by mercy. There's an illustration that I use – and many of you have heard it: you're in Wal-Mart and you come around a corner and you find a little child, two or three years old, crying for his mother. You look around and you don't see mom anywhere. What do you do? Do you keep walking? Almost always people answer, "No. You look for that child's mother." You may even pick up that child and try to comfort him and tell him that you're going to find mommy. Why do you do that? Because you have mercy or compassion. You see someone in trouble and you want to help. When we feel compassion, we come as close as we can in this life to the love that God has for us. **Jesus has compassion.**

I.

Compassion is something we parents often feel. When your children are sick or in pain, don't you want to make it go away? Even when our kids are teenagers or adults, we don't stop feeling compassion for them. When they hurt, we want to make it stop. **Jesus has compassion. He eases our sufferings.**

We see that in our gospel lesson for today. A man came to Jesus for help because he was a leper. Now, it's not absolutely clear what was wrong with this man. Does the Greek word mean the disease we call leprosy today, which is a terrible and painful disease, or was it really a generic word for any kind of skin disease? We can't say for sure. And it doesn't really matter, because even if it was a relatively mild disease, under Old Testament law, anyone with any kind of skin disease was cast out of society. So this man couldn't go home. He couldn't participate in his family's life or in the life of his home town. He couldn't even go to the temple or the synagogue and join in the services there. So he came to Jesus, got down on his knees, and begged, **"If you are willing, you can make me clean."** Notice, the emphasis is on being clean, not on the end of physical suffering. Being clean meant that he could return to his family and his society and his worship life.

Mark says that Jesus was filled with compassion. The Greek word that Mark uses literally means that he felt it in his gut. Jesus was moved by this man's suffering. And he said, **"I am willing. Be clean!"** And immediately, the man's disease – whatever it was – was gone. For the last two Sundays, we've seen Jesus heal people. We've noted his power as the Son of God to intervene in our lives. But we've also talked about the fact that God allows us to suffer hardships when that serves our good. The Bible even says that God sends hardships into our lives, when that's the best way to keep our faith alive. And I fear that we may get an unclear picture of God from that. It might seem like that makes God into a man in a white coat, who has a clinical attitude toward us and doesn't let himself get too attached to us. But that simply isn't the case. Jesus felt that man's sufferings in his own gut. He was moved to help him when he was in trouble. Jesus feels exactly the same about us. He cares deeply about what is happening to us. He has compassion on us. That's why it's never a waste of time for us to pray and ask him for help in all that hurts us and makes our lives hard. More times than we can count, Jesus gives us relief, and that quickly.

Jesus' compassion for us goes beyond the things we ask him for. He knows how hard life is for us here. He knows the weariness we feel in a sin-soaked world and the loneliness. He also knows the temptations that we struggle with and the guilt we feel. He realizes that left to ourselves, we would always lose the battle

against guilt and temptation. Most of us realize that someone who is addicted to drugs or alcohol simply doesn't have the power to break free on their own. God has to give them the strength to do that. Well, we are all addicted to sin. Whether it's gossiping or snarling at our spouse or talking back to our teachers or goofing off at work, every one of us has sins that beat us over and over again. That sin owns us. If something doesn't break its hold on us, that sin will drag us down to hell forever. That's true for me and it's true for you.

But Jesus had compassion on us. He was just as moved by our helplessness as he was by the distress of that leper. He has already intervened and broken the power of sin in our lives. First, he lived and died and rose. Jesus lived the perfect life we can't live. Jesus died on the cross and he paid all that we owe for all the times that sin wins in our lives. He paid for whatever sin you are addicted to and can't beat. He paid for all the sin that lives in our hearts and makes us weak. Then he rose from the dead. He declared that we are free, we are forgiven, we belong to God.

Then Jesus came in the simple message of what he has done for us, and he reached into our hearts and he gave us faith. Our faith grabs on to Jesus' life, and God counts that life as ours. He says that we are as innocent and holy as Jesus was. Our faith grabs on to Jesus' death and now God says that we died and we suffered hell itself and we paid for all our sins. Our faith grabs on to Jesus' resurrection and God says that we are fully and freely forgiven. And every time we hear that good news, God renews the faith that he planted inside us. His compassion for you and me runs that deep.

In that compassion, we find God's answer to all those things that we struggle with: the weariness, the doubt, the isolation, the sins that we're addicted to. Jesus comes in the gospel and he tells us that he loves us. He gives us peace where we had struggle before. Even when our struggles continue, he gives us strength and the ability to go on. And he gives us power to fight against the sins that we're addicted to. Now, the struggle will last all our lives. We're all recovering "sin-aholics" and all our lives we have to face temptation. When temptation wins, we feel beaten and disgusted with ourselves. But our Savior never leaves us. He forgives us again and he promises us a new life where we won't be sin addicts. And in that message he renews us for tomorrow's battle. That is real compassion.

II.

Do you believe in that compassion? I fear sometimes that we Christians suffer from something that I might call "practical doubt." By that, I don't mean rank skepticism that questions all that God has said. I'm talking about a more subtle problem: we don't think about God at all. We can think that it's up to us to solve our problems. When we fail, practical doubt can take the form of bitterness, of feeling sorry for ourselves and of giving up. But God sent Jesus even to solve the practical doubt that eats away at our faith. **Jesus has compassion. He sustains our faith.**

One way that he does that is by keeping us connected to church. After Jesus healed the man with the skin disease, he told him to go and show himself to the priest and to offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded. The same law that made lepers outcasts told what to do if a leper were healed. They had to be cleared by the priest and they had to offer a rich sacrifice: no less than three lambs. Jesus expected this man to follow that command. He was a Jew. Until Jesus died and rose, the Old Testament law code was still God's law for Israel.

And it was the way back into his synagogue. Jesus was teaching us that even after we have experienced the love of God, we still need to follow God. In the Old Testament, they did that through the sacrifices, because those sacrifices pointed to Christ who would die for their sin. Jesus told this man to practice his faith, to continue to come and hear the gospel because leprosy wasn't the last thing he was going to face. It was tremendously uplifting to be healed, I'm sure. But this man needed to return to the regular discipline of a Christian life, to a daily fight against sin, to a regular program of hearing and learning God's Word and growing in faith. Because Christ had compassion on him, he didn't want that moment of mercy to do more harm than good.

The same is true for us. We are so wrapped up in our own lives that we can make our faith a "me" religion. We all have stories about how God has helped us. Those stories are wonderful examples of God keeping his promises. But the stories can't take the place of God's Word. What Jesus did for us on the cross and in the empty tomb is more important to our faith than the "real life" ways that we have experienced God's grace. I'm not saying those "real life" experiences are false or even that we can't share them. But God wants us to keep Christ, crucified and risen, at the center of our faith, not our experiences. God wants us to understand that a Christian life is a daily discipline. When God does something dramatic in our lives, that's a

wonderful blessing. But he doesn't do that every day. When the excitement is over, the discipline remains. We need to struggle against sin every day. We need to hear about his love and his forgiveness regularly. We need to study his word and receive communion. If we think that our experiences are more pertinent or more relevant because they're more personal and interesting, then we are wandering from the path that Jesus lays out for us.

If you don't see the problem, just look what happened when the man in our gospel lesson made his experiences more important than what Jesus says. Jesus told him to tell no one what he had done for him. Isn't that amazing? Now, he didn't mean forever. Once Jesus rose, there would be no problem with telling. But for the time being, Jesus wanted the miracle to be private. Why? What happened when this man didn't listen? Mark tells us that so many people came that Jesus couldn't even enter towns to preach and teach anymore. He had to stay out in the country and still the crowds found him. Why was that a bad thing? Wouldn't we love to have crowds fill this church? Wouldn't it be a blessing if we had to have four or five services because so many people wanted to hear the message? Sure that would be a blessing and I hope God gives it. But those crowds didn't come to hear the message. They wanted miracles. They wanted excitement. Jesus couldn't preach to people who demanded miracles. He couldn't do personal, one on one ministry when people jammed around him everywhere he went.

This man was selfish. He put what he wanted ahead of what Jesus told him and he hurt the preaching of the gospel. We can do the same thing when we focus so much on our personal experience that we lose the heart of our ministry. It's Christ. It's not me. It's not what I think is moving. It's not what has happened to me personally. Jesus is the Savior of the world. It's easy for us to lose sight of what's important, isn't it? But Jesus has compassion on us even then. He extends the same forgiveness to us for that sin as he does for all the others. He alone kept that gospel in focus all his life. His focus replaces our egotism. He died because we really only want to talk about ourselves. He paid for that selfishness. He rose and erased all of God's record of our pride and sin. He opened the door to heaven. And he sent me to tell you that you are forgiven in Jesus' name.

That is real compassion. That compassion sustains your faith. Every time we get egotistical, every time we lose focus, every time we forget what it's really all about, Jesus calls us back and then he forgives us. Every time he does that, he renews our faith. He promises that we will reach eternal life. He will sustain our faith until we stand with him in heaven, free from all the hurts and sorrows, from all the guilt and sin of this life. Until we get there, he will continue to shower us with compassion. Amen.