

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI (920) 261-2570**

“Dead Man Walking”

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Feb. 12, 2012

“A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, ‘If you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured” (Mk. 1:40-42).

A couple of years ago my wife was the TA, the Teacher Assistant for the human anatomy class at the University of Wisconsin. Illustrations, slides, films, lifelike models . . . that’s all good, but nothing replaces the real deal. So this particular class included the dissection of twelve cadavers. Twelve people who very generously donated their bodies for the training of future health care workers. (By the way, the students are taught to treat the bodies with absolute respect and dignity, as if they were family members. No cameras, no nick names, jokes or anything like that. There’s even a little memorial service at the end of the semester when the students are able to meet and thank the family members.) In any event, the cadavers were stored in twelve individual stainless steel tanks and are submerged in alcohol.

For decades, this class has been taught by a wonderful older gentleman by the name of Dr. Edward Bersu, a Norwegian Lutheran. The students are dressed in lab coats and latex gloves some wear the protective glasses, and, as you might imagine, scrub their hands like the dickens after class. Dr. Bersu, however, just walks around in suit and tie. He wears no gloves, and can often be seen leaning over and holding his tie with one hand and digging in with the other. Now, pay close attention to how you feel. He’ll use that same hand in that lab to take a sip from his coffee mug, or to take his pen out of his shirt pocket and write a few notes on a chart, or adjust his tie. Disgusting, right? When asked about it he simply reminds the students the cadavers are resting in alcohol; they are more hygienic than we.

I don’t know about you, but I’m still feeling the yuck factor. I’d still go with the gloves, gown and glass, the whole nine yards. Instincts run high in us around the presence of death and disease.

And so it was around 2,000 years ago as well. Those with leprosy, for instance, were considered untouchable. They were thought to be so contagious that if even their shadow fell on yours, you might end up with the disease. The idea of even touching a man with leprosy was repugnant. It would cause a visceral, gut level reaction like the kind you were feeling earlier.

When he first noticed the irregularities on his arm, he decided not to tell anyone, not even his wife. No sense getting her all worked up if it turned out to be nothing. So he kept his arm covered under his cloak and hoped the blemishes would go away. But they did not go away. Instead they seemed to be dig in deeper and spread down to his hand and up and around his shoulder blade. And when his neighbor noticed, he knew what he had to do. He had to go to the priest whose job included certifying a person as clean or unclean. The priest, in turn, knew what he had to do. Leviticus 13: “The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and

let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' As long as he has the disease, he is unclean. He shall live alone: his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (vv 45-46).

Leprosy was the dreaded disease of the day, the one that usually didn't go away, the one that grew progressively worse, hideous, with eruptions in the skin, abnormal growths, rotting, oozing flesh. The leper was a dead man walking. So the ancient world lived in fear of leprosy and dealt with it the only way it knew how - isolation. If, as a leper, you touch someone (or they touch you), that person is unclean. So . . . no more touching. No more embracing your spouse or even holding her hand. No more ruffling the hair of your son. No more bouncing your baby girl on your knee. There's nothing you can buy or sell anymore because anything you touch is unclean. You are also unfit for worship in the Synagogue. People assume God is angry at you for something you've done, and you half believe it yourself because you know your sin; it is always before you.

Everything changes with leprosy. One day you are living at home with your family and neighbors, engaged in your community and synagogue, doing what you do. The next you're banished, sent to some pathetic colony of suffering along with the other unfortunates who have the disease. These wretched camps were always outside the edges of the city and were usually near the city gates so that you could beg for food from the people coming and going. You are always hungry, always hungry. So from the prescribed distance, you call out "Unclean! Unclean!" and "Have mercy!" Once in a while, someone does, and the sight of a little bread being pulled out of a sack makes you and your acquaintances forget the rules, forget that you're supposed to keep your distance. The Good Samaritan drops his load and retreats in haste, and you and your friends fall on it, competing for it like a flock of ducks.

That's the way it usually works. But this man doesn't even play by those rules. This man is desperate. Luke says he is "full of leprosy." That is, it's not just a spot here or there. He has it bad, from head to toe. The disease has advanced unchecked. Hearing that Jesus is near, this desperate man makes a run for it and does not stop until he is face to face with the Lord. It is a terrible thing to do, putting the disciples and Jesus at risk. One glance at the man tells them what they need to know. The sight of him is repugnant and I suspect the disciples are shocked and angered by this man's audacity. He is like a drop of dish soap on oily water; they immediately withdraw, everyone, that is, but Jesus. Jesus should have drawn back too and severely rebuked this man. But Jesus isn't playing by the rules either. He doesn't move an inch.

"If you will" the sick man says, "you can make me clean." Mark says Jesus is moved with pity or compassion.

In the New Testament, there are three ways to say that. This is the strongest of the three. It implies the lungs, heart, liver, the intestines of Jesus are stirred and upset at the sight of this man's suffering. It's a visceral, gut level reaction. What causes a gut-level disgust in most causes a gut-level compassion in Jesus. "I am willing" he says. Jesus breaks all the rules and stretches out his hand, and touches the one who is untouchable. "Be clean" Jesus says.

Jesus has spoken a command, an authoritative word, and when he speaks like that we know there's going to be an echo in the next verse and there is. "Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured." This is no gradual convalescence. It is instantaneous health. He's been given his life back. No more rotting flesh. No more isolation. No more begging or competing

for crumbs. Jesus tells him to go show himself to the priest so that he can be declared clean . . . so he can embrace his wife again, and ruffle the hair of his son and bounce his baby girl on his knee.

But there's more. Jesus sternly charges him to say nothing about this miracle, for Jesus knows it will cause just too much of a stir. He's not there just to heal. He's there to teach and preach as well. But the man who had leprosy has never been very good at keeping the rules and he goes off spouting at the mouth, telling everyone he can find. This, in turn, has an impact on Jesus. Mark says he can "no longer openly enter a town but is forced to stay out in desolate places."

Isn't that remarkable? Their roles are reversed. In touching him, Jesus gives the leper his life back . . . his family, his community, his synagogue, and peace with God. But now Jesus must live in lonely places, as if he were unclean, untouchable. Mark is being very intentional here. He is pointing to a role reversal that will happen near the end of the story.

You see, we are the ones as good as dead. We are the ones inflicted with the leprosy of sin. And it's not just a spot here and there that we can hide. No, we've got it bad, from head to toe, in thought, word and deed. There's hardly a minute that goes by where we have not broken one of his commands. C.S. Lewis says we sin in between bites of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. That is, sin is so much a part of us that we don't even notice it most of the time. It's our condition. It's our resting state. I not only commit sin; I am a sinner. And the Lord should have had nothing to do with sinners. He should have turned his back on this planet, this colony so capable of suffering. He should have left us to our fate, and we would still call him just if he did. The wages of sin is death. But he didn't turn his back on us. He doesn't play by those rules and never has. He came down to us, drew near to us who were untouchable. "He who knew no sin became sin for us."

There, on the cross, Jesus is as unclean as one can be. He is filthy, his skin is broken, open and oozing. Our sin has been dumped on him. The sight of him is abhorrent to anyone who dares look at him. He is disgusting to them as he hangs there on the cross. Anyone who passes by shakes their head and believes him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted (Is. 53). And in this case, for once they have it right. God is venting his wrath on his Son and his Son knows it. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Up there on the cross God's Son hangs, bloodied, red as crimson, so we can be white as snow (Is. 1). He is numbered with the transgressors (Is. 53) so that we can be numbered among the saints of God.

One more thing, and it's going to seem totally irrelevant, but stay with me. We'll come around eventually. Light travels at 186,000 miles per second. If you were traveling at the speed of light, you would circumnavigate the earth 7.5 times per second. If you were traveling at the speed of light, it would still take 4.3 light years to get to the next closest star in our galaxy. That's a bewildering distance.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "I have wondered whether the vast astronomical distances may not be God's quarantine precautions. They prevent the *spiritual* infection of [our] fallen species from spreading." Lewis was speculating that there may be other planets out there that are sustaining life, but God is protecting them from the leprosy of our sin by making sure there is an insurmountable distance between them and us. It's an intriguing thought, but again, it's only speculation. What we do know is that God did not keep his distance from Earth. He didn't

protect himself from us. He came down to our sin-sick planet, our colony of sin, sickness and death and, moved with compassion (not disgust) he touched the untouchable and loved the unlovable. He took on our sin and gave us our lives back. All praise be to him. Amen.