

Sermon for Sunday, February 15, 2009

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany

By Tim Ljunggren

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| First Lesson | 2 Kings 5:1-14 |
| Psalm | Psalm 30 |
| Second Lesson | 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 |
| Gospel | Mark 1:40-45 |

“A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.’ But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.”

A leper came to Jesus. More than likely, he wasn't rich and powerful; in fact, I would bet that the man suffering from leprosy knew only the life of desperation and depression. He was an outcast from society, literally “untouchable” because of his disease and what his disease represented to all those around him—sin.

In the eyes of many, this man had leprosy because he sinned against God.

From his place in the world's weakness, this leper reached out for the word—the word of God.

“If you choose, you can make me clean. ...”

In that very sentence, this man—afflicted with a dreaded disease—saw everything at once.

He saw that his life was not his own.

He saw that his cry for help would only be heeded if those around him were wrong about his disease and his “sin.”

He saw that his only chance to live was with a man who was radically changing the notion of who God was and what God could accomplish.

“I do choose, be clean,” Jesus said as he stretched out his hand and touched this untouchable leper. “Be clean.”

Jesus brought a new word from God, a word which washes over bodies, hearts, and minds and makes them clean, just like babies straight from their mothers’ baths.

Whenever we celebrate a baptism in our parish, we are all brought once again to the cleansing power of God’s word. The water poured over the person baptized drowns us all anew in its healing flood. The outcasts of this world—and, believe me, we are all outcasts, even when we don’t want to admit it—all stand beneath the same great waterfall of grace, compassion, forgiveness, and love. The powerful and the weak, the articulate and those who cannot speak, the rich and the poor—we are all one in our need for cleansing and rebirth. We are all together in our need to be scrubbed clean by the power of God’s work within us.

For us, Jesus is both the cleansing water and the compassionate word. He promises that we will be people of living water, that our hearts will be quenched by the life-giving fluid that’s provided for us by God. We are made clean, not because we deserve to be made clean, but because God wishes it upon us.

But only if we continually ask for it. ...

Jesus’ power to speak those watery words of cleansing salvation finds its fulfillment in the cross. There, suffering in our own humanity, Jesus accomplishes his work which brings the waters of grace, compassion, and love upon us—those cascading waves that can only be manifested by the will of God. Through a sordid and messy death, the whole world is brought to the place of healing and beauty with cleansed hearts, souls, and minds. We who are outcasts - and, again, that’s everyone one of us that are gathered here in this parish this morning - are now brought into the household of God for the feast. We who saw nothing but the rotting side of the world are now capable of celebrating beauty as we sit down for the banquet.

Just as parents remind their children to wash their hands before supper, so God reminds us that we are already washed in the death of Jesus and that we are

ready for the feast. We are joined by the other outcasts; lepers sit by our sides, and we hold them in high esteem, not recognizing their diseases, but basking in their glow. We are one. We are a family.

We are clean.

We all join with them in the feast of those who have been made clean in the living water which is God's word in Jesus Christ.

Amen. ...

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