

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
Matthew 8:1-4  
January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012

When a painter paints or an author writes, they usually work with some kind of context. For the painter it might be inspiration from what they see or feel. For the author it might be a story they heard or an event they experienced. Context is important for any picture or story.

For this story, especially the first one in our Gospel text for today, there is some important context that perhaps will help us better understand what an amazing thing our Jesus did. We might think, "He just healed a man of leprosy, that's not THAT amazing." But it really is... and it might be this miracle, as much or even more than all the others, that made the crowds gasp with anger, wonderment and astonishment.

But first, let me give you a little context for the sake of the story. I want to spend a little time doing this so that we too might understand the magnitude of what happened in the first four verses of Matthew chapter eight.

You've heard about the disease of leprosy before. But did you know that in the New Testament there is no disease regarded with more terror and pity than leprosy? When Jesus sent out the Twelve He commanded them, "Heal the sick, cleanse the leper" (Matt. 10:8) as if to say, "Yes, I'm including leprosy in the list of terrible diseases I wish for you to cleanse." The fate of the leper was truly hard. One "Biblical times" scholar said that "No other disease reduces a human being for so many years to so hideous a wreck."

There are different kinds of leprosy. Some came with pain in joints, some caused patches on the skin and some caused severe blisters. Some caused the skin to get thick and others affected different parts of the body. Some would affect the nervous system and all sensations would be lost. Other kinds would cause appendages to become deformed with the loss of such things as fingers and toes... and then more.

But leprosy was also lumped in with all sorts of other skin disease. Psoriasis and ring-worm were included. And now you see how "far reaching" such a diagnosis could extend. Any such skin disease would render the sufferer unclean. Different parts of Leviticus and other ritual law would explain how to deal with such things. People were scared to death of this disease. Here's why...

A person with leprosy was banished from the fellowship of the community. They must dwell alone outside the camp; they must go everywhere with torn clothes, a bare head, a covering upon their upper lip (to cover the mouth), and as they went they must give a warning of their polluted presence with the cry, "Unclean, unclean!"

Even in the Middle-Ages the priests, wearing his stole and carrying a crucifix, led the leper into the church, and read the burial Service over him. The leper was a man who was already dead, though still alive. He had to wear a black garment that all might recognize and live in a leper-house. He must not come to the church services but may instead peer through the leper "squint" cut in the walls while the Service went on. You see, it wasn't that a leper had to bear the physical pain of his disease; he had to bear the mental anguish and the heart-break of being banished from human society and shunned literally like the plague.

Now you have an idea of the magnitude of what happened in the text actually was. No one was treated with more contempt than a leper. No one was shunned more, feared more, and avoided more than a leper. And the leper didn't even have the right to speak to Jesus. What a bold request, "*Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.*" He called Him, "*Lord.*" That was bold. He said, "*If you are willing...*" That was out of line for a leper. He said, "*You can make me clean.*" And that, beloved in the Lord, was the truth spoken by a dead man.

So what would Jesus do? Would He not drive away this man who had broken the law? The leper had no right to have spoken to Him at all, but that didn't matter to Jesus. He met the desperation of human need with an understanding compassion that knows no comparison. *"I am willing, He said. Be clean!"* "Be clean" – that's all that needed to be said. And when Jesus says it – it happens.

Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him. Jesus touched the man who was unclean. To Jesus he was not unclean in any other way than you and I already happen to be; he was simply a human soul in desperate need. He was a dead man who needed life. To the world this man was "more dead" than others because of his disease. To Jesus this man was a man like every other man. He was a dead man in himself that needed the light of Christ to show him the way... that needed the life that only Christ can provide by His touch.

For many Christian's today they are concerned about whether or not they have been "touched" by God. For many, this means a particular experience or feeling that gives some sort of evidence that God is with them. Often times people look toward extra-biblical signs and wonders to see if God is really watching, or concerned about the prayers they have or the struggles they are going through. God does not promise to touch us in this way. Many times this is the way we want to be affected, shown great revelations and the like. However, when God "touched" and even "changed" the leper it was not like this.

The touch of Jesus made what is dead alive again. It mattered not how the leper felt about it. It mattered not how the leper acted. As a matter of fact, Jesus wanted the leper to keep his mouth shut about the whole situation because He didn't want to give others the impression that Jesus came to just heal those who had horrible skin diseases. They would not understand. The healing and the cleansing would be for all people. The healing and the cleansing would be for more than just the community that would now accept him and the priests that would call him unpolluted. The cleansing that was important would take place on the cross, bringing the dead back to life.

And that's why life means so much to us Christians. Christ gives life. Is there life growing inside a pregnant mother? Christ gives this life. It belongs to Him. Is there life by His touch through the very means He has chosen – His Word and His sacraments? Christ gives life... no matter if you can see it or feel it. It's His way to do it and not yours. Is Christ so concerned about giving you life that He would touch you, a poor miserable sinner, one just as bad as the leper, separated from God's glory in our sins, in His forgiveness? Christ gives life. It belongs to Him. He alone is the giver and even the taker of life. Not us. Not any of His creation.

When a painter paints and an author writes, inspiration will perhaps take them places... so that in what they do... inspiration takes you places. But with all of this, we have to start somewhere. Our Lord starts with life and the way He gives it is extra special. He gives life in death. Yes, we live and we die and we live in His death. He gives life in HIS very own death. His death means life – your life. And He died for all. Perhaps there is no clearer picture to paint of life for someone that was dead than the life that was granted a man who had a disease that made him as if he were dead. Christ made him alive. The same with us – in His life giving Word – in His life giving sacraments. May God richly bless you and keep you in the Lord's gift of His life for your life. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.