

# St. Matthew's Church

## NEW YORK CITY

### WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

Mark 1:40-45

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, February 15, 2009

In the Gospel for today Jesus was confronted with still another lining human tragedy. A leper came to Him, pleading with Jesus to heal him. **“If you will, you can make me clean,”** he said. Jesus might have said, “Enough is enough. I can endure no more” and shut His eyes. Instead, we are told, Jesus was moved with pity by leper’s condition. According to Jewish law in the first century, those afflicted with leprosy were considered living corpses. As a walking corpse, the leper was regarded as unclean and hence untouchable. Lepers were required to stand at a distance from others. If others approached him, they cried out; “Unclean! Unclean!” The lepers themselves were responsible to warn people to stay away from them, for their affliction, it was believed, afflicted all who came in contact with them.

The leper in this story broke that rule. He came directly to Jesus and dared to speak with Him. Jesus should have been shocked, horrified by the near presence of one of these dreadful and pitiful creatures. But at the sight of the leper’s condition and his aggressive faith, we are told; **“moved with pity, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him.”**

Here is one of the most revealing pictures of Jesus: **(1.)** Jesus did not drive away a man who had broken the law. The leper had no right to have spoken to Him at all, but Jesus met the desperation of human need with an understanding compassion. **(2.)** Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him. He touched the man who was unclean. To Jesus he was not unclean; he was simply a human soul in desperate need. **(3.)** Having cleansed him, Jesus sent him to fulfill the prescribed ritual. He fulfilled the human law and

human righteousness. In Jesus ministry we see compassion, power and wisdom all joined together.

What are we to do?

Jesus never became calloused to human suffering, nor can we. With the sheer amount of suffering in our day, we are tempted to grow numb to others' pain. But we cannot simply close our eyes and shut it out. Christians are called to keep our eyes open, so that we can encounter the suffering of humanity directly and painfully, even as Jesus did. We are called to respond as Jesus did to the leper, a spite of the cost, to be moved with pity and compassion. Christian love means never being unmoved by the suffering of others. Christians suffer with the sufferers and hurt with the hurting.

But is awareness enough? Is it enough just to share the suffering of others?

It wasn't for Jesus. It was not enough merely to feel compassion for the leper. Jesus reached out, touched the leper and healed him. Jesus dared to violate the religious and social customs of his day by actually touching the untouchable. It was not enough for Jesus to feel pity, to feel sympathy for the suffering. His feelings of compassion issued in an action, a healing touch.

Why did Jesus do this? Aside from the reason we have mentioned, that it was most natural for Him, He wanted the leper to feel His willingness and sympathy. The touch said, "I'm with you, I understand, I love you." Those are the human reasons. But there was also an overshadowing theological reason: the touch of Christ's pure hand on the rotting leper is a parable of the Incarnation. Jesus in the Incarnation took on flesh, became sin for us, and thus gave us His purity. "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:21). Jesus laid hold of our flesh. He touched us and healed us. See Jesus bent over the prostrate leper, his holy hand resting on the decaying flesh of the foul-smelling leper, and you see what He did for him. What has He done for us?

There is a relevant application to all this. We will never affect others as Christ did unless there is contact and identification. We have to be willing to take the hand of those whom we would help. Sometimes a touch, caring

involvement, will do a thousand times more than our theology. This is what all churches need to do. We are great in theory. We are careful about our doctrine. But we need to lay our hand on some rotting flesh in our neighborhood, in the executive towers where we work, in the city slums. We cannot expect this to be only the job of missionaries because a church which does not regularly place its hand on the rotting humanity around it will not be sending missionaries to do so either.

Now quick did this miracle happen? In describing it Mark used his favorite word in verse 42: **“Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.”** The healing was sudden and complete. The knobs on his hands grew fingers before his very eyes. Back came his hair, eyebrows and eyelashes. Can you hear the thundering roar from the multitude? Can you hear the man crying not, “Unclean! Unclean!” but **“I’m clean! I’m clean!”**

That is what Jesus Christ can do for you, for anyone in an instant, in a split second of belief. The healing of Christ in salvation from sin is instantaneous and complete: “The blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from every sin.” All my confidence, everything I am, all I represent, all preaching rests in this!

By that loving touch of God in our lives we are empowered. We are empowered to keep our eyes open amid the tragic sights of suffering today. We are empowered to act with healing when we can. We are empowered to believe the gospel that is good news despite the steady streams of bad news. By the loving touch of God in our lives we dare to face suffering, act to heal, and believe in the final triumph of life over death.