

8.20.23 – Pentecost 12
“Healed, He Testified”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Psalm 119:153-156 (NIV)

- ¹⁵³ Look on my suffering and deliver me,
for I have not forgotten your law.
¹⁵⁴ Defend my cause and redeem me;
preserve my life according to your promise.
¹⁵⁵ Salvation is far from the wicked,
for they do not seek out your decrees.
¹⁵⁶ Your compassion, Lord, is great;
preserve my life according to your laws.

Leader: These are Prayerful Words of Man for God! All: Thanks be to God!

Mark 1:40-45 (NKJV)

Jesus Cleanses a Leper

- ⁴⁰ Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.”
⁴¹ Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out *His* hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.” ⁴² As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed. ⁴³ And He strictly warned him and sent him away at once, ⁴⁴ and said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing those things which Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”
⁴⁵ However, he went out and began to proclaim *it* freely, and to spread the matter, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter the city, but was outside in deserted places; and they came to Him from every direction.

Leader: These Words of Healing and Faith Are of God! All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Jesus, we thank you for your healing spirit and the gift of touch. We never know all the lessons you intend for us during times of healing and recovery, yet we trust your compassion and love. Help us to embrace your strength and power as you demonstrate it through healing. Instruct us as we learn these healing stories of your grace and mercy. May your voice be the one heard today as you speak through mine. Amen.

Good morning, again! I hope some of you enjoyed the extra hour this morning! Some churches change the whole schedule for summer, but I thought this might be a good time to experiment, since Sabbath rest is so important. It’s been a good week of slow healing among us, so thank you for your prayers for all concerned. We’re back to normal next Sunday.

Most believe that the psalm read today was written by King David. He was a man of God, yet also faced human temptation. He had “yes” men all around him yet was persecuted by some who ridiculed and tried to shame him into giving up his faith. This is his reaction. Although he had kept God’s law, the psalmist asks God to forgive him, and calls upon his compassion. With 176 verses, Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. It is an alphabetic acrostic poem in Hebrew, with each of the large sections organize the writer’s thoughts by subject. Eight verses of each stanza begin with the same Hebrew letter, with the subjects being joy, praise, lament, petition, and God’s laws or commandments.

We have mentioned in recent sermons how people bargain with God, and this small section of our long poem sounds like one of those instances. He says God promises life to those who obey his commands; and God will punish David’s enemies who were wicked and ignored God’s word. Even though this is hundreds of years before Jesus, his plea for “life through you” (that is, God) almost sounds like receiving our salvation and eternal life through Jesus.

In our second passage from Mark 1, Jesus is travelling around Galilee preaching and teaching to any who would listen. A man with leprosy came to him and asked for healing; it was courageous for the leper to speak with anyone up close and personal. Being considered ritually unclean, he was supposed to yell out “unclean, unclean” so people could disperse and stay away from him. Leprosy was thought to be highly contagious. Before we examine the healing experience, let us get some facts about leprosy **other** than what we know from the 1959 MGM Movie *Ben-Hur* with Charlton Heston, where Moses’ mother, Jochebed, and

sister, Miriam, had the disease and lived in caves. Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is a long-term infection by the bacteria *Mycobacterium leprae* or *Mycobacterium lepromatosis*. Infection can lead to damage of the nerves, respiratory tract, skin, and eyes. It destroys the pain signals in the skin so more severe injuries often occur to hands, fingers, toes, and feet. According to my online research it is treatable and with multiple medications, it can be cured; it is not so highly contagious as our legends depict, but yes, it is still in existence in some countries.

For our purposes, however, we want to only consider the leprosy of Bible times. In Jesus' day, even minor skin diseases like ringworm were considered "leprosy," and individuals with visible lesions were shunned by society. It was considered a hopeless situation because all aspects of one's life were affected: physical pain, emotional shame, mental lapses, and religious and social stigma brought isolation. Rabbis thought it was incurable, so the temple was off limits to a leper. There was a taboo which made touching dangerous and brought about social isolation. Yet being in the presence of Jesus and receiving Jesus' compassion and healing touch broke all societal barriers.

Only two times was it cured in the Old Testament (Numbers 12:10-15 and 2 Kings 5:1-14). Yet, somehow, the man with leprosy in Mark's gospel knew that Jesus could heal him of the disease. He begged Jesus to do so yet understood it would be God's will to do or not do. Jesus had deep pity and compassion for this man, and so he touched him. That contact was not allowed according to the law, but Jesus shows us that he would not be controlled by the Rabbinic law; his power was above it.

After the supernatural and counter-cultural healing, Jesus sternly sent him on his way with strict instructions not to tell anyone what happened. We don't know why exactly: some say that Mark and other Gospel writers used silence as a literary device to explain why the Jews didn't recognize Jesus as the Messiah. That's what is called the *Messianic Secret* that we spoke about last Sunday. More likely, though, is that Jesus did not want to identify his mission purpose quite yet. Remember how he told his mother not to explain the wine at the wedding in Cana? He did tell the man to show himself and his clean skin to the **priest** who could declare him **ritually clean**; he could then offer the appropriate sacrifices to God, who was working in his life and in society in a new way. The man disobeyed Jesus' instructions and told others beside the priest, and can you blame him?! Telling others of the healing affirmed and confirmed it in his own mind; it must have felt unbelievable at first.

Sharing a testimony, especially one of faith, anchors it into one's own heart too. His healing was big news in their community, both religious and social. Remember his isolation from the disease? From strictly a human point of view, we can understand his excitement and need to share this good turn of events in his life. Like Talitha, he would be welcomed back into his social setting, re-building community where he could live and love well and share his faith in Jesus. Isn't that why we have meals together, Church?

The fact that this man testified freely meant that Jesus' preaching and teaching ministry was interrupted because he became a celebrity. Jesus was stopped anywhere he went! He had to go into hiding to regroup and recharge. The good news is that the man's testimony did not hinder

Jesus' full ministry or purpose; it might have shortened it for that geographic area, but we know that testimonials only spread the divine Gospel. It just brought Jesus closer to the cross.

One aspect of divine healing is the love and sense of community that soothes the spiritual soul. I experienced that at the hospital and at Cardiac Rehab; as we heal and strengthen and share life together in these healthy ways, we are welcomed with respect and encouragement into a new community of doctors, nurses, technicians, staff, and care managers, a community that the leper and most people with disease or experiencing homelessness do not have. There is strength in community.

What can we learn? We must certainly learn to ask God for our needs. We must also learn that Jesus is compassionate and will consider our needs. Jesus did not just sympathize with the man's condition or his isolation; he saw the reality of it, the isolation and degradation, and had pity. As Jesus went to the cross, he must have felt the same way as the man did. Joseph had a similar visceral reaction seeing Jesus bloodied and beaten carrying his own cross when he offered to carry it for him. Christ must have had a visceral reaction to the man's persecution when he risked touching him to heal him. Jesus' healing of the man with leprosy was a visceral whole-body experience, like last week's Elisha story. Like Elisha laying on top of the boy to raise him to life, Jesus, by touching the man and risking all cells being affected, he figuratively put his hand to hand, body to body, mouth to mouth to heal the leper. This was an expensive gift of divine love, because after this and other healings, people knew Jesus had to die.

Jesus' power was no longer a secret, but a blessing to be shared and a living sacrifice to be made. **This** is our Savior! You may not have a disease to heal but remember all he's done for you and for us, to heal us from our sinful ways, daily ailments, scary diseases, and even selfish wants. Then tell someone about that power! Amen. //

Will you pray with me? All gracious God, we thank you for our health whatever it is. We thank you for the supernatural healing that is available to each of us through salvation and eternal life. Lord, we humble ourselves in the presence of your healing power. Keep those we know and love safe, strong, healthy, faithful, and motivated to continue serving others here on earth. Let us proclaim your name in all we do, for it is in your name that we pray and dedicate our lives. **Amen.**