

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the Service of Ordination and Installation February 12, 2012  
Lessons: Isaiah 11:1-9 and Mark 1:40-45

## CATCH THE VISION

The leper is a sinner being punished by God. He deserves his disease. It is a curse he has brought upon himself by his own choice to sin. He is unclean and so must be cast out of the community so God's covenant people may be kept pure. He is an untouchable. If someone clean chooses to toss him some coins from a distance, that act is a good deed, a deed of pity which increases the merit of the giver, but only God can forgive the leper and restore him to his people. It's not just a matter of physical healing; it's a matter of spiritual healing. One may pity the leper, but all must accept that his affliction is just and fair and right in accordance with God's holy will.

Stop. Do the things I have just said offend or at least annoy you? They offend me, but much more importantly, they offended Jesus. Just such thinking about God's will and human suffering was the prevailing truth at the time. Cruel as such a dismissive attitude toward a diseased person may sound to us, it was the attitude of that time's theology, and anyone who challenged it was thought to be rebelling against the sovereignty of God. Whoever dared enter into the uncleanness of an outcast cursed by God, that person became also unclean and risked becoming an outcast as well. It was esteemed as God's choice to bless or to curse, and God's sovereign choice was not to be questioned by mere human beings. The pious person might pity the leper but only from a distance, and compassion, which requires entering into the sphere of the leper's uncleanness, was out of the question.

In just such a time came Jesus of Nazareth to be confronted by a very bold leper. True, the man falls to his knees before the teacher, but what he says challenges the very heart of God. "If you choose." – *if you will, if you care to do so* – "you can make me clean."

This confrontation, this challenge to the will of God, has been very important for me throughout my ministry because it negates the notion that everything which happens in this world happens in accordance with the will of God. Jesus rejected that notion, and for me, his rejection of that oppressive belief which persists to this day speaks hope for all of us and for our bitterly afflicted world. Because Jesus reached out and touched that leper and because of all else he said and did to negate the acceptance of evils as God's will, I may say to you with confidence that God does not will evil upon this world and its people, that God is not glorified by judgment and condemnation, that God is not gratified by casting out the

unclean, that God's freedom to reject people is not the message but only a reminder that God loves freely, without obligation. God's will is for human salvation and wholeness. Jesus came to seek out and save the lost, to embrace the unclean and restore them to the people, and to glorify God by giving himself for the undeserving.

Our translation and others say that Jesus felt *pity*. No, that word may have fit in the past, but today we make finer psychological distinctions, and the word translated "pity" means *compassion*. By reaching out and touching the untouchable man, Jesus shows that he is doing something entirely different from the benevolent act of tossing coins from a safe distance. He enters into the man's uncleanness to bring him out of it. He becomes a leper with the leprous. That's what infuriates his pious critics: not that he feels pity, but that he acts in sympathy or empathy to unite himself with the cursed. Because he is a man of God, a teacher of God's truth, he (in their eyes) soils God's holy name. Insofar as such a thing is possible, Jesus makes God unclean.

That's the gospel. God is willing to be unclean with us if we are unclean. God is willing to have the holy name put to shame to embrace those who are shameful. In love – love for us – God is shameless. Both testaments, Old and New, show us and tell us that God is willing to act shamefully in compassion to embrace and restore people who have been humiliated or have put themselves to shame. For love, the holy name of God is soiled. In love, the sovereign God who cannot be obligated by anyone, self-obligates to human beings. Covenants are self-commitments made by God, and God has refused to give us up and go on being God without us.

The magnitude of what Jesus does by reaching out and touching that leper, declaring he does indeed choose healing over judgment, salvation over purity, and compassion over divine standards, is overwhelming, and it comes to its fulness when Jesus gives himself to be crucified. The crucified person is put to shame on public display, reduced to a non-person. In the belief of Jesus' own people, the one crucified is cursed and dies outside the covenant, apart from the holy name of God.

He did it for us, and that simple confession lies at the heart of our faith: Jesus suffered and died *for us* – all of us, the world of us – but that's only one side the truth. The other side of the same truth is that he did it for God – not only for the sake of God, but *for God*. To approach the meaning of that truth, we must say that for us he suffered and died *as God*.

Now, why am I dwelling upon Jesus' outrageous compassion for rejected people when we're installing new officers and my sermon title is, "Catching the Vision"? We have a Visioning Team, and later this morning, we will have a conversation about what it means to be Presbyterian here and now and what it means to go forward together as a visioning church.

I hope you will come to the adult forum for this conversation because I'm going to try to approach the heart and spirit of this church so we can understand ourselves in terms of what is the core of our faith, our hope, and our shared community.

Jesus puts God's compassion above all else in God's dealing with people. That choice he made and continues to make changes everything, and to catch the vision, we need to see, feel, and understand our beliefs and hopes in terms of his choice. The church exists and the church's existence matters because of Jesus' choice for compassion. Because he reached out and touched a leper, violating the sacred truth of the holy people of that time, we have a vision that matters in this world. "If you choose," the leper challenges him, "you can make me clean." Not by keeping his distance, but by entering into and embracing the man's uncleanness, Jesus answers, "I do choose. Be made clean!"

Newly elected church officers, thank you for your willingness to serve in a time of transition and change. Please do what God enables you to do to catch our faith's vision of hope for this world, to let it touch the core of your own faith and hope, and please do what you can to help this church keep catching that vision. Merely preserving a church as a historic institution is meaningless, and fewer and fewer people in our time even care what goes on inside these walls on a Sunday morning. But serving and sharing the outrageous compassion of God ties our hearts and minds to the future God wants for this world. God will have that world, not by force or it would have been over and done long ago, but by reaching out to touch, embrace, heal, and make whole. May God guide you as you seek to lead this church in the way of Jesus Christ. Amen.