**Luke 5:12-16**

**The healing power of God**

There are so many healing stories in the Gospels that sometimes we are tempted to conflate them into one big narrative about Jesus as some sort of miracle-worker who will meet our every need whenever we ask him to and we get disappointed, or even angry, when he doesn’t. But I’m not sure that is the right way to view the healing stories of Jesus. At the end of John’s Gospel, in 21:5, we read this: “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.” So we know that the stories of healing that the Gospel writers did include were just a sample of the whole ministry of Jesus.

So why did they select the ones they did?

Well, I think we need to read each one very carefully and consider each one on its own merit to discover why each particular Gospel writer includes each particular healing. Because I think that we have something different to learn from each story rather than just viewing them as one, continuous narrative of the healing power of Jesus.

And that’s certainly true of this particular story that we’ve just heard read from Luke 5:12-16, where Jesus heals this man with leprosy. There are some very specific learning points to take away from this story that tell us something about how God meets us in our own pain, but also about how we are to meet others in their pain too.

So let’s have a look at the story and see what we can learn from it.

And to begin with, just a quick word about leprosy first, which Jesus heals the man from. Leprosy was a truly terrible disease in Biblical times, as it is today. I remember working for a short while a leper colony outside of Delhi about 20 years ago and it really was one of the saddest things I have ever experienced. Broken people absolutely devoid of all hope. They were like shells of human beings with no hope of any escape other than death.

And in Biblical times as well as the physical horror, there was also a social horror attached to the disease. Lepers had to live separately from the rest of the community in colonies away from the rest of society. They had to leave all family and friends behind and food would be brought out to them and left at a safe distance, some hundreds of yards away. And when the people went back into the community, the lepers could come out and retrieve the food for the day.

Lepers would have to ring a bell if they were drawing near other people. And, of course, they knew that they could never see their husbands or wives again, never hug their children again or watch them grow up, never take part in any social events again.

As well as the physical horror of the disease, the social impact was truly awful. Lepers were left alone to die in solitude and emotional agony.

Such was the situation for the man in this story. And this man was in an advanced state of leprosy, as we read in verse 12: “[he was] covered with leprosy”. It must have been a pitiful and frightening sight.

But what a man of courage he was, because he had dared to leave the leper colony and come to where Jesus was in the city; breaking all the social conventions and facing the wrath of the people who lived there.

Without any doubt, as he came towards Jesus, calling for attention, the crowds and the disciples would have shrunk back in horror, not knowing what to do, not knowing how to react but just wanting to get away from this shell of a man. The crowds would have parted, and Jesus would have been left standing all alone with this leprous man coming towards him with all the steel and courage and determination that he could muster.

I wonder how he felt when he saw that Jesus didn’t move away from him?

I wonder how he felt as Jesus stood there, fixing his gaze on him?

Probably for the first time in many years, here was someone actually showing interest in him and not being scared away by his appearance and his circumstances.

And he comes before Jesus in his brokenness and his body language and the way he phrases his request says it all, as we read in verse 12: “When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, ‘Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.’”

Such brokenness:

He bowed before Jesus.

He put his face towards the ground.

He begged Jesus.

He put all the power in Jesus’ hands: ‘Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean’.

Here was a man at the end of his tether, with no hope left in him. Here was a man who had almost no more fight left in him. Utterly broken by the circumstances of life.

There are occasions when we may feel like this man. I’m not talking about the usual stresses and strains of everyday life, but when an event or a series of events so cataclysmic happens in our life and we feel absolutely and completely broken inside. A diagnosis of terminal illness. The loss of a loved one. Severe depression. The loss of a job. Financial difficulties that completely consume us. The breakdown of a relationship. These things can utterly break us and take away any sense of hope for the future and leave us in complete mental and emotional anguish.

And when we have times like that in our life, all that is left to us is to quietly beg Jesus to intervene. We don’t even have the strength to make our case, or argue with God or demand his engagement, or rationalize with God about why he should. We just bow before God, put our face to the ground, and quietly say, “Lord, if you choose to, you can make things different”.

There is nothing that you or anyone else can do in a situation like that: only divine intervention can make the difference.

And look how Jesus responds to the man in verse 13: “Then Jesusstretched out his hand, touched him, and said, ‘I do choose. Be made clean.’”

We can’t underestimate the power of this sentence. “Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him…”

Can you imagine how the crowd would have reacted?

Can you imagine how the man must have felt?

When was the last time that someone had reached out their hand and touched him?

This is simply the most beautiful, affirming response that Jesus could have made.

Even before the healing of leprosy came to pass, how much healing was transmitted in a single touch?

And you know, the same is true for us. Whatever terrible situations we face in life, sometimes those situations are removed from us by God’s grace, sometimes we grow through them in God’s strength, and sometimes they remain for a long time. But the touch of God in our life brings an incredible depth of healing in and of itself. Just knowing that God is with us in our agony is a healing in and of itself. Just knowing that we are not alone and that God cares for us is an incredible healing realization that often gives us the strength that we need to carry on.

But what we see in this story – and what we experience in our own lives – is more than just a sympathetic hug from Jesus. In Biblical times, a leper was considered to be ritually unclean and therefore outside the religious community itself, which was the ultimate community rejection and alienation.

And here’s the crunch: if someone touched a leper, then they were deemed to be unclean too. So when Jesus reaches out and touches this man, he is doing something incredibly radical by not just showing sympathy but by taking on himself the pain and alienation and agony of the leper.

And so it is when Jesus stands with us in our own agonies: it’s not just an act of sympathy, it’s Jesus actually taking on our pain and alienation and sorrow.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth”.

You are not alone in your pain. Jesus not only stands with you in it, he also carries it with you and for you. There’s that lovely saying of Jesus in Matthew 11:28: “Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest.”

Jesus carries our burdens for us and so we can rest in him, always…

So whatever you are going through in your own life at the current time, take heart from this passage because God knows what you are carrying, God hears you, God is offering you his healing touch and he stands with you in your pain, offering to carry your burden for you.

But I think there’s another really important point that we can draw out of this story from the Gospel of Luke, which has less to do with what we can receive from God ourselves and more to do with how we are to show love to other people who are feeling broken and vulnerable in their own lives.

Because this passage, as recorded by Luke, comes immediately after the story, in which Jesus calls his first disciples and he concludes that calling into ministry with these words in verse 10: “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people”. So Jesus has just called his first disciples and this is the first miraculous act that they would have seen him do.

So as much as this is a healing for a man desperately in need, it is also a teaching moment for those who are following Jesus. It’s as if Jesus is saying to his followers: “If you want to follow me, then this is the type of sacrificial love that you are to show to the broken and outcast members of your society”.

As individuals and as a church, we are called to be a healing presence to others, a healing presence in our community. And that doesn’t just mean putting a sympathetic arm around their shoulder when people are hurting. It means actually embracing the pain of others, embracing the pain of our community, and standing alongside people in their own personal agonies.

It is a really tough calling, but it is at the heart of our ministry together.

If we are to truly live out our calling as a Mission-Shaped Church, then we have to reach out to the hurting and offer them the love and support that they need in this moment rather than merely expecting people to come and join us on a Sunday. Our Sunday worship together should be a physical manifestation of all that we are in the local community for the other 6 days of the week.

Our Mission Statement is simple: “Building community together on the values of Jesus”. And at the heart of doing that is by embracing the pain of those who hurt and offering them hope and love for the future.

So let’s return to the story to see what we can learn from how it ends.

Well, the healing takes place and then we read this in verse 14: “And Jesus ordered him to tell no one. ‘Go,’ he said, ‘and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them.’”

Don’t tell anyone about the healing, but go and show the priest. That’s a really strange command, isn’t it? Because the first thing the man would want to do is go and visit his old friends and family and rejoice with them about what Jesus had done for him. But Jesus is being really wise here and he’s giving this instruction because he knows the hearts of human beings and how we react to the miraculous in our midst.

In Biblical times, healings from leprosy were extremely rare. In fact, in the Old Testament, there’s only three such healings recorded. So when this man showed up at the priest’s house, the priest would have known that something truly amazing had taken place and he would have been convinced that God was at work in the midst of the community.

At that time, the religious leaders of Israel had a list of miraculous signs that would occur when the Messiah came to them, and one of those miraculous signs was the healing of leprosy. So by telling the man to go straight to the priest, Jesus wanted to announce who he was, the Messiah of God, to the religious institutions of the day.

But if the man were just to go to his friends and family, the reaction would have been totally different…

Look what happens in verse 15: “But now more than ever the word about Jesusspread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases.” The news of what happened spread throughout the community first rather than the religious leaders interpreting this for the people. And so rather than Jesus being welcomed as the Messiah, he was instead treated like some miracle-worker, a novelty act, a wonder-worker. And people gathered to him, not to praise God that the Messiah had come, but so they could all receive a piece of the pie that this man was dishing out.

The whole thing gets skewed: people don’t come together to praise God. They just all want a piece of Jesus and for him to perform more miracles for them, like some genie-in-the-lamp granting wishes. And that’s not the appropriate way to treat Jesus.

So what happens? Verse 16, we read this: “But Jesus would withdraw to deserted places and pray.” Yes, he loved people and wanted to bring them healing and peace. But he wasn’t just some wonder-worker; he was more than that. He was the Messiah, sent by God, and he had a message that the world needed to hear.

Being a follower of Jesus is not a consumer-product. We are not followers of Jesus just to get whatever we want from God. We are in a relationship with the Messiah, the King of kings and Lord of lords and we cannot just come to Jesus to get him to grant us three wishes. If we do, he will retreat.

So the message for us from this passage is really simple. When we are feeling utterly broken by the tragedies of life, we can come humbly before God and ask for his healing. As we do that, we will receive what we need from him, which may be the alleviation of our situation, but will certainly involve the experience of God sitting in our situation with us, carrying our burdens for us.

But, as we turn to him, we do so not treating him like some wonder-worker who is just there to give us everything we want. Instead, we come into a relationship with the Messiah of God who knows our deepest needs and will meet us in our pain in ways that we cannot possibly imagine.

And that is the model of ministry that Jesus sets for each one of us to follow: to reach out to the broken and the vulnerable and the hurting in our own community, to sit with them in their pain, and to offer them the same hope and love that we have received from God ourselves. And in that way, we will fulfill our mandate to be a Mission-Shaped Church and together, we will fulfill our Mission Statement at St. Andrew’s to “Build community together on the values of Jesus”.