

If I could only preach one sermon, my point would be Jesus loves us more than we could ever imagine and wants to bring healing and wholeness to our lives. I have been preaching the Gospel for nearly thirty five years in an ordained capacity and five before that as a missionary. During that time I have learned one indisputable fact: Only the love of Christ can satisfy and sustain us. Jesus Christ is in love with the world and desires more than anything else for us to receive his forgiveness, grace, power, and love so that we can live an abundant life.

A leper approached Jesus and said, “If you choose, you can make me clean” (v. 40). Jesus said, “I choose” (v. 41 NRSV). Other translations have Jesus saying, “I am willing” (v. 41 NIV). Jesus is willing and able to bring his love into our lives. His love can transform, guide, and comfort us. All we have to do is receive it. Jesus’ love is available.

The fact that Jesus’ love is available may seem obvious. However, it has been my experience that many people see the love of Jesus as something beyond their reach, reserved for holy people or something they have to earn. You hear it in the language of people: “Lightning would strike or the roof would fall in if I went to church.” Unfortunately, some Christians have not helped to discourage this attitude. They look like they were baptised in lemon juice are fault hunters and have nothing but judgment for the world.

I remember playing golf years ago with a friend who said to me, “Say a good word for me with the Man Upstairs. Life has been tough lately.” I replied, “Hey, why don’t you talk to him yourself? He loves you and wants what is best for you. The question is will you let him love you?” He was silent the rest of the round. You could tell it never occurred to him that God was ready to listen to him and help him.

You see, it is not a question of whether or not Jesus is willing to love us; the question is will we allow his love and presence to be the dominant force in our lives? Jesus’ love is the only real love that is truly available and reliable for any of us but it takes some people a very long time to learn it. Ask the world, “Will you love me?” The world will reply, “Sure, as long as you are successful and don’t disappoint us.” Ask your workplace, “Will you love me?” Your workplace will reply, “Sure, as long as you turn up on time and improve the bottom line.” Ask the economy, “Will you love me?” The economy will reply, “Sure, as long as you have a job and can pay your bills and taxes.” Ask the culture, “Will you love me?” The culture will reply, “Sure, as long as you stay young and do everything you can to impress others.”

It is amazing to me how many people will continue to look for love in all the wrong places. As a priest I have had a front row seat to people’s lives and I have never seen a job, a toy, a house, or a romance bring the kind of joy, healing, and power that comes through a relationship with Jesus Christ. The leper knew this. There was something about Jesus that told him Jesus was the only one who could make him whole again. Leprosy was an awful disease. It caused the skin to develop terribly painful ugly sores. A rabbi especially was not to go near lepers because he was required to obey certain Jewish laws regarding cleanliness. So it took great courage for this leper to even approach Jesus. He did so because he knew that Jesus could give him the healing love he so desperately needed.

Maybe you feel like that leper. You feel left out, picked on, and pushed aside. You feel ugly. You are desperate for a healing love that will show you your worth and make you whole. The good news is Jesus is walking by. He is right there beside you. You don't have to beg like the leper. All you have to do is say, "Lord, I need your love and grace. Come and make me clean and put a new spirit within me." If that is your desire, Jesus will be overjoyed, and he will shower you with his mercy and grace.

Our Gospel in Mark says that when Jesus was moved with compassion he reached out and touched the leper. He touched him. Back then they didn't know much about leprosy. The Jews thought if someone got leprosy it was because of some grievous sin. Lepers were unclean and if you touched a leper you also became unclean. Yet Jesus reached out and touched the man. He didn't heal him and then touch him. Jesus touched him and his touch healed him. It was Jesus' personal touch that healed him.

With maybe two or three exceptions, Jesus always healed with a personal touch. This is critical for us to remember. Jesus' love is available and it is personal. This means Jesus loves the world in general but he also loves the world in particular. Jesus loves each one of us personally and desires to touch us and communicate with us personally. We serve a personal God. God takes things personally! The gospel of John says it all, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Our relationship with Christ is personal.

Everyone's relationship with Jesus is different. Because Jesus' love is personal, he is going to connect with us and we are going to connect with him in different ways. He knows us better than we know ourselves. What is good for one person is not good for another. Our relationship with Jesus is custom made.

Someone once said that the two most important days of your life are the day you were born and the day you discover why you were born. A relationship with Jesus brings those two pivotal days of your life into focus. Jesus empowers us to live our lives with purpose and meaning.

I have found Facebook- which our live-streaming is on today- to be a great way to connect with people. I think Jesus would have used Facebook. However, social media will never replace personal touch and connection. My advice is that from time to time we need to take our eyes off a screen and look into the eyes of the people we love and offer the personal touch like Jesus. Jesus is our best model. He never stopped reaching out to others in love. He still does today.

In the story of Jesus healing a leper there are two ways we see that Jesus' love is unstoppable. The first is through the man's response to Jesus' healing. This man had been healed by Jesus' love! This was like telling a bridge party not to share gossip. There was no stopping the news of Jesus' love and power! The healed man told everyone and everyone flocked to Jesus. That is a great picture. The best advertising is word of mouth, and the best evangelism is word of mouth— telling others what Jesus' love has done for us.

When the love of Jesus gets hold of us, there is no stopping it. We want to tell others and show others what his love has done for us. I can preach about sharing our faith, but the better part of me knows that when Jesus gets hold of people I will not have to tell them to share it. It will be unstoppable.

The other way we see that Jesus' love is unstoppable is through his audacious act of crossing the cultural taboo of leprosy. Lepers were unclean, condemned to live away from the community. They were even separated from their own families. They couldn't worship with their faith community. They were completely ostracised. Yet Jesus disregarded the taboo and loved this leper. Jesus was always disregarding cultural boundaries and rules, especially when it came to relating to people. He reached out to hated tax collectors, oppressed women, and unclean lepers. He healed on the sabbath and didn't care which laws he broke. For Jesus, love is the highest law. Jesus' love is unstoppable and limitless. It knows no bounds. Nothing can stop the love of God!

Our culture has its own version of lepers today. We often set up boundaries and taboos against those we misunderstand, fear, or hate. Some of us think that Jesus' love stops short of them but we are wrong.

A colleague of mine loves to tell the story about a woman who was active in his church who had a husband who was an atheist. He would come to worship with her occasionally to support her but he thought faith in God was just a fairy tale. (If I had a dollar for every time someone told me or implied to me that faith in God was a fairy tale, I would be rich!) Not long after she became active in the church, her husband was stricken with cancer. She loved him and cared for him as he became weaker and closer to death's door.

Before he died he received Christ in prayer. When he was asked what convinced him to believe in Jesus, his answer was quite surprising. It was not because of a thoughtful sermon he heard or because of an astute theological argument. He said he became a Christian because of the way his wife loved him and cared for him during his battle with cancer. He commented that he always heard about the love of Jesus and thought it was a nice idea. But when he experienced the loving way his wife held him and comforted him even though he didn't believe, he knew in his heart Jesus' love was real.

Jesus' love is available, personal, and unstoppable. It knows no bounds. It crosses cultural taboos, touches the untouchable, and makes believers out of atheists. Amen.

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