

Dearly beloved people of God, grace and peace to you from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In today's gospel reading we see Jesus at work once again – this time healing a single person of their leprosy. But before we go any further, I want to unpack the fact that this man is said to be a leper. In Scripture, when someone is said to have leprosy it could mean a number of things. It's kind of a catch all word for skin diseases, kind of like how we say someone has cancer when in fact it could be breast cancer, brain cancer, prostate cancer, bone cancer, etc. But what this means for this man who comes to Jesus is that he is unclean, he's an outsider, he is someone that nobody would want anything to do with. If we look back into the Old Testament, in the book of Leviticus to be specific, we can see how lepers were to be treated – with extreme caution. If someone had leprosy or some sort of visible skin disease and were in the company of other people, they were to yell out to the crowd, "Unclean, unclean," so that no one would come in contact with them. As harsh as those rules may have been, they were there for a good purpose. Lepers were to stay away for the good of the community, so that others wouldn't become lepers or catch some skin disease which rots away your flesh and fingers. Fortunately today, there are cures for almost all skin diseases, but back then, that wasn't the case. So for us to see and hear about Jesus not only talking to this unclean man but also touching him, that would have raised a whole lot of eyebrows back then.

But that's how Jesus works; he willingly goes into situations knowing that others will look at him as unclean too. We heard about him healing all sorts of people in the last few weeks; people that were possessed, people that had all sorts of diseases, all sorts of people who would be considered unclean, untouchable, unwanted, and unloved. This just isn't something everyone goes around doing, I mean, what would the neighbors think? But this is exactly how God works

in Jesus Christ, He reaches out to those who are lost, forgotten, unclean, untouchable, unwanted, and unlovable, those who we would rather not want to see or deal with at all. And Christ also reaches out to us who may be lost, forgotten, unclean, untouchable, unwanted, or unloved

Let's go back to the text. In the gospel reading we see the leper come to Jesus so full of desperation that he is begging and kneeling, crying out to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." But then we hear about Jesus, who is so full of compassion and moved with pity, that he simply reaches out his hand, touches him, and says, "I do, be made clean." And I want to pause there a moment. Notice what the leper says; notice what Jesus says. The leper says, "If you choose." The leper doesn't tell Jesus that he has to heal him or else, but he leaves it up to Jesus and his mercy to whether or not he might be healed. With those three words, "If you choose," not only do we hear a desperate man in need, but we also see a man who understands how God works in the world; something we all can learn from him. Because this man, by saying, "If you choose" to Jesus Christ means that he knows that he might not have that question answered the way he hopes or wants.

Now, what does that say to us? How many times have we, when in prayer and in conversation with God said to Him, "God, you better do this or else! You better listen to me and you better do what I want because if you don't than you know what? I might just stop believing in you, I might just stop trusting in your goodness and mercy!" I'm sure we've all had those moments where we tell God, "you do this or else." But is that how we approach the God who created us, the God who guides us and the God who sent his Son to die for our sake in order that we might truly live, now and in eternity? A few weeks ago I mentioned that because God has baptized us

and has promised to be our God, that gives us the privilege to have an attitude with God where we can shout out at him and demand that He continues to be faithful to us or do something or anything when it seems like our world is crashing around us. And that's true, but there's a caveat to that too. When we cry out, when we scream at, when we shout out at God demanding that He does something or anything to fix or lighten the burden of whatever kind of predicament we find ourselves in, the words we always should say once we're all done ranting and raving or saying with the last ounce of energy we have are the words said by the leper, "Lord, if you choose." And there aren't any better words which show how deep and genuine our faith is than when we leave any and all things in God's hands by simply saying, "God, help me out of this mess, but only if you think it's what needs to be done." In case you don't think you ever say something like that, you already do say those very words every week or every day when you say "thy will be done" in the Lord's prayer.

But there's a risk in saying something like that, isn't there? If you have ever asked someone to do something and then said at the end, "but only do that if you want to," you know that you are **risking** the fact that they just might not do it. That's why those of you who may have kids know that when you tell your kids to do something, you tell them to do it or else. You don't give them a choice in the matter. If I said to my daughter, "If you want, please do your homework" and she doesn't, then I really don't have any right to get upset at her because, well I gave her that option. But if I do say something like that to her, that shows that I **trust** she will make the right decision. And this is kind of how it works when we say to God, "If you choose" or "thy will be done." We are risking and taking a leap of faith that even though God has promised to hear us, God has not promised to be our personal butler where we can tell Him what to do, when we want Him to do

it, and how we want Him to go about doing it. However, God has promised to be gracious, to be merciful, to be forgiving, and has promised to give us hope and courage when our world is crashing around us, and life in the midst of pain and death.

So while it might not be what everyone wants to hear, the truth of the matter is that while God has promised to hear us, God has not promised to be at our beckoned call to do whatever it is we need to be done. But something else we can learn from those three words of the leper “if you choose,” is how deep our faith is and how truly committed we are to God. Because it’s awfully easy to say you have something called “faith” when everything in your life is going perfectly, but it is a truer sign of faith when you still trust and rely on God even when there seems to be no hope, when there is nothing to look forward to, when the only thing you have left to rely on is Jesus Christ who is the Truth, the Way, and the life.

Some people might say that when our world is caving in on us, that’s when you know God has abandoned you. I’m sure the leper who Jesus healed heard that over and over again and probably thought that a number of times as his skin and flesh were falling off his body. But, paradoxically, those times where it feels like God has abandoned us, those times where we are falling apart are the times when God is really reaching out to us, when God is really there, when God really wants to make His presence known. Because the good news, the gospel promise in all of this is that this is how God works – God does not stay away from the unclean, from the dirty, from the despised, from the wretched, from the sick, from people’s whose lives are falling apart. In fact, these are precisely the people God is looking for to heal, to renew, to give new life to. And you are those people God has come to reach out to in Word and Sacrament. Amen.