

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

“If You Will, You Can”

February 14 & 15, 2009

Old Testament prophets, especially prophets like Isaiah who penned last week’s Old Testament lesson, promised that the Messiah, when he came, would heal disease and sickness, as a mark of the coming of the Kingdom. And over the course of the past few weeks we have seen how Jesus healed all kinds of disease and sickness.

Think back – in our Gospel lesson from two weeks ago we heard the account of how Jesus healed the man with the unclean spirit. Last week, our Gospel lesson told of Jesus healing Simon’s mother-in-law as well as many more who were, as Mark said, “sick with various diseases” as well as casting out many demons. And now, in today’s Gospel lesson, we hear of a leper asking Jesus to heal him as well. The word was out, Jesus’ fame had spread throughout the region, here was one who healed. And so the leper came, knelt down before Jesus and said, “If you will, you can make me clean.”

Lepers, by virtue of their disease, were outcasts, cut off from the community. Their only hope for restoration came from their being cleansed and declared clean by the priest so that they might return to their community. Somehow the leper of our Gospel account had heard of Jesus and of how this Jesus was healing all kinds of disease and sickness. And so, trusting that he could heal him as well, the leper comes forward. “If you will, Jesus, you can make me clean.”

He comes, knowing that he didn’t deserve such cleansing but as a beggar, pleading for cleansing. He falls down before Jesus in worship, trusting and believing in the mercy of Jesus. And Jesus responds. Mark says he was filled with pity, a word in Greek that literally means being moved down in your gut. And being moved with compassion, he does the unthinkable. He stretches out his hand to that leper not unlike how he stretched out his hand to Peter who was sinking in the stormy Sea of Galilee to rescue him and he touches him even though touching someone unclean with leprosy was forbidden by temple law. And then he said those wonderful words, “I am willing; be cleansed.” And immediately, Mark says, the leprosy departed from the man and the man was cleansed – not only cleansed physically, which everyone could see, but also cleansed spiritually, that is, forgiven by God in the flesh, Jesus Christ. And the man was so excited that, even though Jesus commanded him not to tell anyone, he told everyone what Jesus had done. And so many people were coming to Jesus that he couldn’t even go into any towns anymore but rather went out into the deserted places and even there people came to him.

What Jesus did for that leper is something that he has done and still stands ready to do for you and me. He has cleansed us from the leprosy of our sin and has restored us outcasts to the community for which we were created in the first place. And with that cleansing comes the forgiveness of our sins, a new life, and salvation.

But just as importantly he continues to hear us when we come to him seeking healing and cleansing for ourselves and for others. And as we come, not commanding him but begging him, kneeling in worship, we say, “if you will, you can.”

“You can” means we believe that this Jesus is none other than the omnipotent Son of God who not only has power and authority over all things but that he has shown he will use that power and authority over all things for our good. And so we come to him in faith asking for healing of our mind or body or spirit, for employment, for help in meeting the financial challenges we face, for solutions to problems with family and friends, for safety, for hope, for comfort, for strength, for anything and everything. There is nothing too big or too small for we know that Jesus has pity on us just as he had pity on that leper so many years ago.

And we say, “if you will”. Like the leper we realize that Jesus knows best what is for our good and so we say “not my will but thine be done.” And that can be hard sometimes. We ask for healing or for employment or for financial help or for solutions for problems or for safety or hope or comfort or strength because we not only know Jesus can answer our prayers but because we feel we need what we’re asking for now! And sometimes Jesus’ answer is “no. It’s not for your good. Even though you think it’s for your own good, I know better.” Or his answer is “not yet. You’re not ready to receive what I am going to give you.” Or his answer is “yes and right now.” But many times we are like the cartoon that pictured a little boy kneeling in prayer. Upset with God, he said, “Aunt Harriet hasn’t gotten married yet, and Uncle Hubert still doesn’t have any work, and Daddy’s hair continues to fall out. I’m getting tired of praying for this family without getting any results.” And that’s why we must come with an attitude of submission. “If you will.”

Four men went into a church to pray. The first stood and prayed, “I don’t know what I’m doing here, because, after all, didn’t Jesus say that God knows our need even before we ask? Why should I pray? To me prayer seems unnecessary!” The second man stood and prayed, “This is a world governed by immutable laws. How dare I approach God and ask Him to change any of the regulations of the universe just to suit my will? To me prayer seems illogical!” The third man prayed, “It strikes me as being emotionally and mentally dangerous to run to God with my troubles. I ought to be man enough to solve them myself. I think that prayer is unhealthy and immature!” The fourth man, eyes cast downward, prayed, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

As we consider how Jesus cleansed the leper, may we be bold in coming to Jesus with our needs knowing that he not only can but that he will answer our prayers according to his compassion and his wisdom. In Jesus’ name. Amen.