

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>40</sup>And there came a leper to him, beseeching him, and kneeling down to him, and saying unto him, If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. <sup>41</sup>And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; be thou clean. <sup>42</sup>And as soon as he had spoken, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was cleansed. (Mark 1:40-42, KJV)

One of our favorite hymns here at Immanuel is “Beautiful Savior.” To hear our congregation singing that hymn is one of the things my wife Carol misses most about not being able to worship here. She has her own responsibilities and her own liturgies to lead, which she loves, but she wishes she could be here from time to time to lend her voice to the singing of “Beautiful Savior.” Especially she is fond of our tradition of singing the third verse *a cappella*.

Jesus is indeed our Beautiful Savior. He is the fairest of ten thousand, a bright and shining star. The angels, seraphim, and cherubim, as lovely as they are, seem ravished by the mere sight of him and are well content to spend eternity in adoration of him, singing their “holy, holy, holy.”

But, wonder of wonders, Jesus himself seems unaware of his own beauty, and instead counts *us* beautiful. Indeed, he counts us so beautiful that he rushes forth to touch the leper man. He “put forth his hand, and touched him.” Like a mother who cannot rest content with simply sitting and watching her child, but gladly reaches forth to touch the child, so Jesus touches the leper man.

No one else did. In an ancient world, very often baffled and overmatched by illness and without antibiotics and reliable theories of medicine, there was a kind of horror of progressive skin diseases. The word “leprosy” seems to have covered a wide range of skin problems, some of which are mild and passing, some of which are disfiguring, debilitating, and ultimately fatal. For all of them, the cry went out “unclean, unclean!” Short of an official

pronouncement of a priest, the leper was an outcast to society according to the ancient legislation of Leviticus:

<sup>44</sup>He is a leprous man, he is unclean: the priest shall pronounce him utterly unclean; his plague is in his head.

<sup>45</sup>And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean. <sup>46</sup>All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be. (Lev. 13:44-46, KJV)

Lord, pity the leper man! And in this evening’s story, the Lord did!

By rights, the leper in this story should not have been so close to Jesus as to be able to speak with Jesus and for Jesus to reach out and touch him. But the leper seems to believe that Jesus is the Savior, and he does not mean to be held back. God bless him for that. He is perfectly right. Jesus is *his* Savior too, as well as the Saviour of the greatest saint, and he should not always try to draw near to Jesus.

Notice the faith the leper has in Jesus. He does not ask Jesus to pray for him, but, more directly, to heal him:

If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. (Mark 1:40)

And Jesus does will to heal him, and immediately does so. He commands that there should be healing, saying unto him, “I will; be thou clean,” and healing leaps forth into being, just as earth and sky and all creatures leapt forth into being in the beginning when the Lord said, “Let there be light...” And so it is, that the word of the Lord is powerful and never fails to accomplish its purpose.

But what intrigues me is the touch of our Lord. His word would have been sufficient, yet Jesus also reaches out and touches the leper. For all the world, it looks akin to the gesture of one overflowing with love, such that he cannot keep his hands off the beloved.

And such is the sovereignty of Jesus over this world that touching the leper does Jesus no harm. Chrysostom puts the point beautifully:

For His hand became not unclean from the leprosy, but the leprous body was rendered clean by His holy hand.

In the eyes of the world, you and I might be lacking in beauty. But not in the eyes of Jesus.

Again, in the eyes of us ourselves, we might be lacking in beauty. Indeed, consciousness of our sins and failures might cause us to picture ourselves as unlovely — even ugly, even foul. But not in the eyes of Jesus.

In the old controversy with the Zwinglians over the Lord’s Supper, there are all kinds of interesting Biblical arguments back and forth about whether the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament should be understood symbolically, like Zwingli said, or really and literally, as Lutherans and all Catholics say. I, for one, am glad to be a Lutheran because, among other good reasons, it fits so well with this evening’s Bible story. For once again, as in days of old when Jesus reached out his hand to touch the leper man, so now in this Holy Sacrament, this very same Jesus will reach out his hand to touch you. He cannot help himself. His love compels him. He will reach and touch you with his very body and blood and promise you that you are worth more than life to him.

He is a Beautiful Saviour, and the Gospel is that we are beautiful to *him*, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.