



“Keep your distance ...”

Matthew presents the Lord Jesus in all His kingly glory. The first four chapters tell us about His unique divine origins and birth. The Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5 to 7 show us His unique divine wisdom. And chapters 8 to 9 show us His unique divine power to heal as Matthew links together ten healing incidents. The first one of the ten occurs as soon as Jesus steps down from the mountain where He has just preached.

Matthew 8:1-3

When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a proof to them.”

In Matthew, the crowds are almost always friendly to Jesus. Here again, impressed by His teaching, they continue to follow Him.

Very bravely, a man who had been an isolated outcast for much of his life, daringly approaches Jesus. The disease which he has is very likely not Hansen’s disease that is referred to as leprosy today. That condition primarily affects nerve endings. Though we are not sure about the exact illness, the leprosy of the Old Testament was a skin condition and according to some texts appeared to be contagious. It certainly sounds as though it was unsightly. The Greek word that is used can also cover elephantiasis, psoriasis and vitiligo (the depigmentation of the skin). According to Leviticus 13 these individuals were considered ritually unclean, were forced into self isolation and were excluded from any community events, including public worship.

His coming towards Jesus in the middle of the great crowd that followed Him was unlawful, daring and likely repulsive and scary to many people who were there.

Jesus responds, unexpectedly, by reaching out and touching him. As people approach Him, Jesus never seems to respond the same way. He always responds according to the person’s need. To the woman who had been isolated and ignored because of her continued loss of blood, who feels like a scant unworthy footnote as Jesus heads to heal to daughter of the important Jairus – Jesus gives attention and time. To the rich young ruler who was hung up about his wealth, Jesus issues a challenge to give it all away. Speaking to the Samaritan woman, He asks her fetch her husband, knowing that she has had a life of divorces and remarriages. Meeting the blind man who had hung his head and looked down all his life in unspeakable darkness, Jesus asks him to look up and brings the light for the first time.

To a leprous man who had had no physical contact for who knows how long Jesus offers the inestimable gift of human contact. Actually, divine contact!

The words used in the text say so much.

People affected with illnesses speak of the great difference between being referred to as “a leper” or as “someone affected by leprosy.”

In the eyes of all those around him, including Matthew, the man who approaches is “a leper.” He has become nothing more than the ugly repulsive condition that everyone sees as soon as they lay eyes on him.

Surprisingly, as the man approaches Jesus, he doesn’t ask to be healed. Or to be cured of the disease. The leprosy made him ritually unclean. Excluded from worship, and from human contact. His request to Jesus gives us a glimpse into what he really longs for.

While Matthew and Mark just tell us that the man knelt before Jesus, and Matthew adds his use of the word “Lord” as he approaches Jesus – this is unusual for Matthew – Luke adds that the man knelt in worship. His words certainly echo that attitude.

“... you can make me clean.” The man approached Jesus believing that He had the power to grant the request.

But his request is interesting. He does not ask to be cured of the disease. He asks to be made clean. To be restored to community. To be restored as a participant in the life of worship of the community to which he wants to belong.

Jesus response is so striking. He touches the man. He expresses His desire that the man be cleaned. And then we are told that the leprosy was cleansed. Jesus did not see a leper. He saw a man with leprosy.

For some of us, the isolation and seclusion we are facing is unbearable. To those of us who are social animals and who like being around friends and crowds and communities, this is a very difficult time, as we find ourselves forced into isolation for the first time.

My prayer is that we will really miss the things we take for granted. Coming together as a community of faith. The simple sharing of a meal, of refreshments with a sense of gratitude. Shaking the hand of a friend, receiving a hug as we arrive at church. All things that we take for granted and do not value enough. When the day comes when these simple daily graces are restored, may God make us truly thankful and grateful.

But for those of us who are not used to this forced isolation, I pray that it will force us into a second thought for the many in our community who live with isolation everyday of their lives as a matter of fact. Some are isolated by their lack of mobility. By an illness. By fears that they cannot control. By poverty and embarrassment. By looks or limitations that they feel make them unworthy of being in public. As we live this sense of isolation, may it make our hearts tender for those for whom this is a way of life.

And as we struggle with the isolation, with the loneliness, with the limitations ... may it lead us

to turn to the Lord for His healing touch. In the normal course of our ordinary daily lives we too often fill our loneliness by turning on the music in the headphones, keeping the television on for background noise, trying to find a busy spot with lots of people. We don't like the calm. The quiet.

The man with leprosy knew that his greatest need was not being cured of the apparent illness, but being cleaned so that he could be restored to the life of worship. May our isolation teach us that what we most need in the hustle bustle of everyday life is not more noise to make the quiet go away, but the touch of the Lord that brings peace and solace,

whether we are alone in the stillness of the night, or packed into a busy metro car at rush hour running off to another hectic day in the busy world we long for.

.....

Lord Jesus,

We approach because we believe that you are able to make us clean ...

Make us clean of our prejudice of others that we dare not approach.

Make us clean of the busyness that so easily overlooks those who are isolated and alone when our own lives are busy and fulfilled.

Make us clean of our desire for noise, for activity, for stuff ... when we feel empty and alone. Teach us again to turn to you in our moments of longing and need.

Make us clean, that we might come close and worship you again.

Continue to give wisdom to the authorities and protection to the medical staff as they deal with this crisis. Preserve those who are most at risk. Comfort the afflicted and the grieving.

Make us patient as we wait for life to return to normal, and grateful when it does.

Amen."