Sermon Notes for World Leprosy Day

Reading: Matthew 8:1-4
Also (optional): Leviticus 13:45-46 and Revelation 21:1-4

Matthew 8:1-4 (NIV): “When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, ‘See that you don’t tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.’”

Some Suggested Notes

This year on World Leprosy Day we are looking in three directions – at the past, the present and the future. The Bible does this many times. For example, in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses preaches three sermons to the Israelites as they stand on the brink of entering the Promised Land: reviewing the past (chapters 1-4), speaking to their present situation (chapters 5-26) and looking to the future (chapters 27-30). This has the effect of giving perspective and enabling right choices to be made.

Looking Back

In Matthew’s gospel we meet a man who was desperate to be healed (or more accurately ‘cleansed’). His condition is variously described in different Bible translation as being ‘leprosy’ or ‘a dreaded skin disease’.

It probably needs to be said that the Greek work lepra which is used here included a range of skin conditions in addition to leprosy as we medically understand it today. It wasn’t until 1873 that a Norwegian scientist named Hansen discovered that leprosy is caused by a bacillus cobacterium leprae (which is why it is sometimes called Hansen’s disease). In New Testament times, this simply wasn’t known. The man in the gospel story was desperate because his leprosy had isolated him and made him unclean. People with leprosy today are desperate. They are affected by a disease that causes them to lose feeling through nerve damage. If left untreated, it can lead to deformity. Socially, because of the stigma which still persists, it isolates them from their families and communities.

The man who threw himself at Jesus’ feet discovered that the Lord was more than willing to heal him. He was immediately cured and made clean (which is the truer meaning of the Greek word). Imagine the smile breaking out on his face and the joy welling up from within as he realized this!
Looking back in history, when American Leprosy Missions started its work in 1906, there was no cure available. However, in the 1940s, scientists discovered that the drug dapsone was effective against the leprosy bacterium – a ‘cure’ was at last being talked about! It wasn’t completely effective, though, and the world had to wait until 1982 when multi-drug therapy (MDT for short) was developed by combining dapsone with two other antibiotics. This modern miracle of medicine proved to be the cure so desperately needed. Today we can put a smile on people’s faces and joy in their hearts by providing this cure!

It’s interesting that Jesus tells the man who was healed to go and be examined by a priest. Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 don’t make for the most exciting reading in the Bible, but they do explain that the law required this to be done (along with all the details!). The priest was like a doctor: he could verify if healing had taken place or not. If the priest confirmed this man’s cure, he could then be restored to his community.

In the parallel passages (Mark 1:40-45 & Luke 5:12-16) we discover that the man was too excited to keep it to himself until he’d had the priest’s report! He was telling everyone what Jesus had done for him, causing crowds of demanding people to throng around Jesus looking for healing for themselves.

If we take time to study the Levitical regulations, we can see how leprosy was regarded in Old Testament times. Leviticus 13:45-46 makes it crystal clear that anyone infected was unclean and must live outside the Israelite camp. This was obviously a mechanism for protection as disease could (and did) spread very quickly through the traveling population.

As with lepra in the New Testament, the Hebrew word for leprosy in the Old Testament (sara ath) includes other conditions as well as true leprosy. Leviticus mentions various skin diseases and even mildew probably caused by parasitic fungi. So, leprosy was much misunderstood in these days, and was treated by isolating anyone who contracted it.

**Leprosy Today**

Today we seek to integrate, not to isolate. We can effectively cure and can medically verify this. Reconstructive surgery can reverse some of the disabilities that the disease causes.

Just as the man in the gospel story was made “clean”, American Leprosy Missions seeks to bring holistic care to those affected. It is important to reverse the social isolation, to educate and to give employment to people who are otherwise shunned by their families and communities. Now that the cure can transform each person “after cure” is increasingly important. American Leprosy Missions aims to see patients experience “life in all its fullness” which Jesus came to bring (John 10:10).

Notice how Jesus touched the man (Matthew 8:3). Probably nobody had done this for a long time. This in itself would have communicated that Jesus valued him as a person and would undoubtedly have provoked an emo-
tionally powerful reaction. The care being ministered today in the name of Jesus throughout the world similarly restores self-worth and dignity for hundreds of thousands who are diagnosed with leprosy each year and for millions living with disabilities caused by it.

What the MDT drugs can’t do is to restore the loss of feeling caused when mycobacterium leprae damages the nerve endings. Early treatment can prevent this, but many people do suffer in this way and will have to live with such impairment for the rest of their lives. American Leprosy Missions’ practical work of caring is vitally important for each person struggling to live with the inability to feel pain (which is the body’s way of telling us that something is wrong).

Looking Forward

A whole new world opened up to the man who was healed by Jesus. In the same way, American Leprosy Missions is able to bring real hope to every person affected by leprosy that it encounters today.

What does the future hold for American Leprosy Missions’ work? Its vision is a world without leprosy.

It is an enormous challenge to rid the world of a disease. Please pray for two things:

Firstly, that an effective vaccine may be developed. MDT is a cure for those who already have leprosy, but there is still no vaccine available to prevent people catching it in the first place. Currently, American Leprosy Missions is working in partnership with the Infectious Disease Research Institute in Seattle, Washington to develop a new leprosy diagnostic test and the world’s first leprosy vaccine. Please pray that we might be successful in developing a vaccine in the near future.

Secondly, that extreme poverty will also be eradicated in the world. It is poor people who are affected by leprosy; their immune systems can’t effectively fight it. If we’re going to “make leprosy history”, we need to “make poverty history” as well.

The evangelist, Billy Graham, was once asked whether he was an optimist or a pessimist. He replied, “I’m an optimist – because I’ve read the last page of the Bible!” Revelation 21:1-2 is not quite the last page, but is an important corrective when we look towards the future. God will create a new heaven and a new earth; in fact, everything becomes new! He is presently engaged in his work of re-creation, transforming sin, disease and death through the Gospel. We are called to be partners with him in such exciting times. Many people affected by leprosy have wonderful Christian testimonies as they are transformed by Jesus today through American Leprosy Missions’ work.