

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 11, 2021

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS'
THE POWER TO FORGIVE**

Luke 5:12-16

Today is the first Sunday after Easter. (How's that for a profound opening line!) Just last Sunday we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus with shouts of "He is risen! He is risen indeed!" With Easter Sunday now behind us, some people may think it is time to move on from Easter and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let me respond to that by saying it is *never* time to move on from Easter. It is *never* time to put the message of the resurrection of Jesus back in a box until Easter comes around next year, as if it has no meaning or implications for life as we live it each day.

As I said last Sunday, the resurrection of Jesus changes *everything!* It changes how we look at life. It changes how we face the prospect of death. It changes how we view eternity. It gives us hope for the future. It sustains and strengthens our faith here and now. It gives us peace and power and confidence to face uncertain days. It changes how we live. It changes how we look at Jesus. Everything we read about Jesus in the Bible, we see through the lens of His suffering, death, and resurrection. We know He died for us on the cross. And we know that His death on the cross was not the end of the story. We know that death could not hold Him. Death could not contain Him. He is a risen Savior. He *was* dead, but He *is* alive, never to die again. As we sang last Sunday'

Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now your sting?
Dying once He all does save,
Where your victory, O grave?
Alleluia!
(Charles Wesley, "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today")

Alleluia (or Hallelujah), indeed! The resurrection changes everything – including how we look at Jesus in the Gospels. From our vantage point in history, after His death and resurrection, we cannot look at Him without taking into account the events of His crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. So, as we return to our *Travels with Jesus* today, we do so knowing how the story ends – or, more accurately, how the story *will* end when Jesus, our risen Savior and living Lord, returns to bring the promise of the everlasting kingdom of God to complete fulfillment.

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Now, to our *Travels with Jesus*. I do hope you forgive me for putting off until next Sunday the story of Jesus' healing of a paralyzed man, and Jesus' audacious claim (in the view of the Jewish religious leaders) to have the power to forgive sins. Instead, I want to talk today about

something that comes before it not only in the Gospel of Luke, but in Matthew and Mark as well.

THE HEALING OF A LEPER

Matthew (8:1-4), Mark (1:40-45), and Luke (5:12-16) all tell of Jesus' encounter with a man who had leprosy. None of the Gospels say exactly where this encounter took place. Luke simply says "Jesus was in one of the towns" of Galilee (5:12).

Leprosy was a broad term for a number of skin diseases of varying severity (what we think of as leprosy itself, plus other conditions like psoriasis, lupus, and ringworm) for which there was no known cure. In its most virulent form, leprosy produced lesions on the skin and swelling. Sometimes it attacked a person's nervous system, resulting in a loss of feeling, such that it has been called "a painless hell" (Dr. Paul Brand, quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 172).

The law of Moses required lepers to be quarantined, if we can use that term, from the rest of society – not for 14 days but *permanently*, unless they could prove to the priests that they had been healed. According to Leviticus 13, the law required lepers to wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, wear a face covering over their nose and mouth (i.e., a mask), and announce themselves by shouting "Unclean! Unclean!" as they approached others. Imagine if, every time you went to the grocery store, to Wal-Mart or Home Depot, you had to warn people with shouts of "Unclean!" and your appearance caused them to react with horror or disgust.

Ostracized from their families and community, lepers had to live by themselves outside of town, or with other similarly-afflicted lepers. They could not re-enter society unless and until they were declared "clean" by the priests. For those who had the most serious form of an infectious skin disease (what we think of as leprosy itself), it was like having a death sentence. Josephus, the 1st-century Jewish historian, said that lepers were treated "as if they were, in effect, dead men." Dead men (and women) walking, you might say. In fact, to the Jewish rabbis, the healing of a leper was as difficult as raising a person from the dead (Hughes, 173).

While Jesus was in one of the villages of Galilee, this man who was covered with leprosy from head to foot came up to Jesus and asked Jesus to heal him. Whether he had seen Jesus previously from a distance or only heard of Jesus and His power to heal, we don't know. But there was no doubt in his mind that Jesus had the power to heal him. We see the man's humility in the way he approaches Jesus. He bows before Jesus with his face to the ground. There is no sense of entitlement, no sense that he deserves Jesus' attention. That he approaches Jesus at all is a sign of boldness on his part. He knows he has nothing to lose and everything to gain. The worst that could happen to him would be for Jesus to say "No." He clearly believes that Jesus *can* heal him and make him clean. It is not a question of Jesus' ability. His request focuses not on Jesus' power but on His willingness. "If you are willing," he says, "you can make me clean" (5:12).

“If you are willing.” Isn’t this the same thing Jesus said to God the Father in His prayer in the garden on the night before His crucifixion? “If You are willing,” He prayed, “take this cup of suffering from me. Yet not my will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42). “If You are willing.” As we saw at our Maundy Thursday service, the Father said “No” to the Son in order to say “Yes” to us. In order to save *us*, Jesus could not save Himself. He was willing to endure the cross and the unimaginable horror of being forsaken by God the Father in order to spare us that horror. In order to save *us*.

Here, in this encounter, Jesus demonstrates how willing He is. He shows His heart of compassion. Not only does He declare His willingness to heal this otherwise hopeless man, He shows it by doing what was unthinkable in His day. He reaches out and *touches* this outcast. The natural human instinct throughout history has been to avoid lepers like the proverbial (or literal) plague. But Jesus does not avoid him. And He does not simply acknowledge the man’s presence. He does not simply speak to the man. He *touches* him.

Mark says that Jesus was “filled with compassion” (Mark 1:41). He was deeply moved by the plight of this man and his longing to be healed – which, if you think about it, was analogous to being raised from the dead. The leper desperately wanted his life back.

How did Jesus respond? “I am willing,” He said (Luke 5:13). “Be clean.” And what happened? The leprosy left him. Immediately. (Luke 5:13) It was instantaneous. Jesus spoke the words and it happened.

WHY SOME AND NOT OTHERS?

I can’t explain why Jesus chooses to heal some people of their afflictions and not others. I can’t explain why God heals some people who have cancer and not everyone. Many of you have prayed for me for years to be healed of my daily chronic (sometimes debilitating) tension headaches. Yet my headaches continue. It is not because God lacks the power to deliver me from these headaches. He *is* able, more than able. There is no doubt about that. Nor is it because the Lord doesn’t care about me and my headaches. He does. Deeply. I know He does. But He has purposes – eternal purposes – that transcend my headaches. Sometimes He allows us to experience “thorn(s) in the flesh,” like Paul did (2 Corinthians 12:7-10), and withholds His healing, in order to use our hardships for our good and for His glory. I believe that with all my heart.

COMPASSION INCARNATE

Whether Jesus chooses to heal or not to heal in a particular case, do not ever doubt His compassion. In addition to the healing of this leper, Jesus is the subject of the verb “to have compassion” on five other occasions in the Gospels’

- In Matthew 9:36, where Jesus has compassion on the crowds that were drawn to Him because they were so vulnerable and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd;
- When He fed the crowd of 5000 men, plus women and children (Matthew 14:14; Mark 6:34);

- When He fed another crowd, this one numbering 4000 men, plus women and children (Matthew 15:32; Mark 8:2);
- When He had compassion on two blind men and restored their sight (Matthew 20:34); and
- When He showed compassion to a widow whose only son had died (Luke 7:13).

In three of His parables – the stories He told – compassion (or the lack of it) is a central theme:

- In the story of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan embodied compassion in the care he gave to the man who was beaten and robbed (Luke 10:33);
- In the story of the Prodigal Son, the father was filled with compassion for his wayward son and ran to greet him when the son came to his senses and decided to return home (Luke 15:20); and
- In the story of the Unforgiving Debtor, in response to Peter’s question about how many times to forgive someone who has wronged you, Jesus spoke of the compassion of the “master” of the man who had run up a huge debt and couldn’t pay it, and how he took pity on him. He had compassion on him. But the man whose debt had just been forgiven turned around and refused to forgive the debt of one of his co-workers who owed him a much smaller amount of money. The man with the huge debt was shown compassion. But he refused to show compassion to his friend, and ended up paying a huge price for his lack of compassion (Matthew 18:21-35).

Compassion is defined as a sympathetic pity and concern for others in their suffering or misfortune, conjoined with a desire to help. It is more than just a feeling. Real compassion contains the desire and willingness to help. If you look up the word “compassion” in a dictionary, whether online or the old-fashioned kind, you will find a picture of Jesus beside it. At least you should, because Jesus is the embodiment of compassion. He is compassion incarnate. You can see that both in the stories I just mentioned and in the loving concern He expressed not only for this leper but for people in all kinds of situations and needs, both physical and spiritual.

COMPASSION IN ACTION

When we show compassion to others, whether we think they are deserving or not, we are following the example of Jesus and expressing His heart.

Ernest Gordon – perhaps some of you have heard of him – was a Scottish soldier who spent three years as a POW in World War II. He was one of the POWs forced by the Japanese to build the famous “Bridge on the River Kwai.” His book, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, was the inspiration for the movie *To End All Wars* (2002). Through the witness and example of two fellow POWs, Gordon became a Christian in the midst of his captivity and subsequently sensed a call from God to vocational ministry. After the War, he pursued that call, became a Presbyterian pastor, and served nearly 30 years as Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University.

On one occasion during his captivity, a truck carrying wounded Japanese soldiers pulled into the prison camp. They had been bombed by Allied planes and had left their posts to seek medical help. As the Allied prisoners lined up to watch, a Japanese captain ran in front of the truck, yelling: “Don’t let that truck in here!” Furious that these soldiers had abandoned their positions, he looked them over with disgust, took out his pistol, and said: “You must leave now! Do not bring these dogs here. Move the truck.” The driver tried to start the truck, but it wouldn’t start. The captain ordered two of his soldiers to check the engine.

As this was happening, Ernest Gordon began walking toward the truck. The Japanese captain told him to stop, but Gordon kept on walking, which was a risky thing to do. From behind him, one of the Scottish officers said: “Captain Gordon, I forbid you to give aid and comfort to the enemy.”

Gordon replied: “Major, those are wounded, dying men. They’re no harm to us.”

“Ernie,” the Major said, “get back to your men.”

Gordon shook his head “no” and continued to walk toward the truck. The Japanese captain was startled. Gordon said: “Could someone please get me some water?” No one moved. He said it again: “Could someone please get me some water?” One of the prisoners brought him a bucket of water. Gordon stood in front of the injured soldiers on the truck – wounded Japanese soldiers – and began to tend their wounds. Following his lead, several Allied prisoners stepped forward and approached the truck. The Japanese captain was shocked that these POWs would tend to the wounded Japanese. Stunned, he turned and walked away.

That is compassion in action. That is showing compassion like Jesus.

Jesus is in the compassion “business.” Except, for Him, it is not a business. It is a way of life. It was *His* way of life. And it is to be *our* way of life. *Yours and mine.*

AT THE BORDER

Everybody knows (or should know) of the chaos going on at our nation’s southern border. It is a colossal crisis. I only want to say this about it. Jesus calls us to be compassionate. Paul says that as God’s dearly loved children, we are to “clothe (ourselves) with compassion,” as well as “kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience” (Colossians 3:12). Jesus wants us to show compassion to people who are in need. Especially to children who are in need, who are very often pawns in the plans of their parents or others whose motives may well not be honorable.

Compassion, however, does not mean encouraging, enabling, or rewarding those who break the just and constitutionally-enacted laws governing our nation’s borders and national sovereignty. The meaning of compassion is diluted, if not nullified, when it is used as a pretext for law-breaking.

What we need, as we deal with the crisis of illegal immigration, is the wisdom of Solomon. Or Someone greater than Solomon. If it were easy, we would have solved it long ago.

THESE THINGS ARE TRUE OF YOU

I don't want to end this message on that note. I want our attention to be on Jesus and the beauty of who He is. I remember a song from the Promise Keepers' days back in the 1990s that meant a lot to me. I even had a friend from our church in Pennsylvania (Rick Herbster) sing it at my installation service as the Pastor of Faith in 1997. The song is called "These Things Are True of You." The words go like this'

Unshakable, immovable
Faithful and true
Full of wisdom, strength and beauty
These things are true of You.

Fearless, courageous
Righteousness shines through in all You do
Yet You'e so humble
You laid down Your life
These things are true of You.

And as I turn my face to You
O Lord, I ask and pray
By the power of Your love and grace
Make these things true of me, too
Make these things true of me, too.

Patient, compassionate
Love flows through You
You never give up on the hopeless ones
These things are true of You.

Holy and blameless
You stand up for justice and truth
Yet You love mercy and forgiveness
These things are true of You.

And as I turn my face to You
O Lord, I ask and pray
By the power of Your love and grace
Make these things true of me, too
Make these things true of me, too.

(© Maranatha! Music; lyrics by Tommy Walker)

May you see and know the compassion of Jesus both in the Bible and in your life. And may These things be true of us. Lord, let it be so, now and always. Amen.