

## He Touched Me

*Lev 13: 2-3, 45-46 When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. The priest shall examine the disease on the skin of his body, and if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; after the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean.... The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.*

*Please pray with me:*

*We come before you God, with hearts that yearn for your loving touch. Soften our resistance. Open our lives. Resuscitate our spirits. Speak to us through your Word today. Amen.*

The word **Leprosy** struck fear into the hearts of the people who lived in Jesus' day. The passage that was read from Leviticus probably dates from practices at least a thousand years before Jesus' walked Palestine. In that era, just about any skin problem from a rash to pimple, to chicken pox could have been classified as leprosy. Leprosy in itself is a disease, for a long time thought to be a skin disease, because people with leprosy developed horrible sores and sometimes even their extremities, fingers or toes, noses, ears, would seem disappear.

Recent research on this disease indicates that in fact, leprosy is a nerve disorder. As the nervous system dies off, people lose their sense of touch. Studies in a leper colony in India show that because there is no sensation of pain, lepers don't notice when they burn themselves, or wound themselves. In fact, the mysterious disappearance of fingers and toes may in some part be due to the fact that in the dark of night, rats were observed, feeding on the lepers. They know it—they couldn't feel it.

In any case, leprosy would leave its victims so scarred and disfigured that they struck fear into all who saw them, and for centuries, anyone classified as leper was, according to the Leviticus code, ritually unclean—so anyone who touched them would become unclean as well. Thus, they were forced to live outside the city walls, isolated from the rest of society, forced to live apart from their friends and family. .

The words you are about to hear are not original to me; they are adapted from a chapter of Max Lucado's book Just like Jesus<sup>i</sup>. Today, we're going to look at life through the eyes of a leper from the 1st century. While we do so, I invite you to think about ways in which we today treat some among us as lepers. Perhaps the first analogy that comes to mind are the victims of AIDS, but maybe we also, whether we admit it or not, treat some segments of society as lepers. Most often those we fear for one reason or another. Maybe homosexuals, or maybe the homeless. Maybe we treat as untouchable other less obvious victims, people we just don't like the look of, or people who walk or talk or act differently than we're used to. Maybe you're the one who feels like a leper sometimes - excluded, unloved or unlovable. Afterwards, we'll have a time for silent reflection, when we all can consider the question when it comes to the untouchable, what would Jesus do?

*Mark 1:40-45 A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country, and people came to him from every quarter.*

For five years no one touched me. No one. Not one person. Not my husband. Not my daughter. Not my friends. No one touched me. Sometimes they saw me. Rarely, they spoke to me. And when they did, I sensed love in their voices. I saw concern in their eyes. But I didn't feel their touch. There was no touch. Not once. No one touched me.

What is common to you, I coveted. Handshakes. Warm embraces. A tap on the shoulder to get my attention. A kiss on the lips to steal a heart. Such moments were taken from my world. No one touched me. No one bumped into me. What I would have given to be bumped into, to be caught in a crowd, for my shoulder to brush against another's. But for five years it has not happened. How could it? I was not allowed on the streets. Even the rabbis kept their distance from me. I was not permitted to worship in my synagogue. Not even welcome in my own house.

I was untouchable. I was a leper. And no one touched me. Until today.

One year—it was during harvest—my grip on the sickle seemed weak. The tips of my fingers numbed. First one finger then another. Within a short time I could grip the tool but barely feel it. By the end of the season, I felt nothing at all. The hand grasping the handle might as well have belonged to someone else - the feeling was gone. I said nothing to my husband, but I know he suspected something. How could he not? I carried my hand against my body like a wounded bird.

One afternoon I plunged my hands into a basin of water intending to wash my face. The water turned red. My finger was bleeding, bleeding freely. I didn't even know. How did I cut myself? On a knife? Did my hand slide across the sharp edge of metal? It must have, but I didn't feel anything.

"It's on your clothes, too" my husband said quietly. He was behind me. Before looking at him, I looked down at the crimson spots on my robe. For the longest time I stood over the basin, staring at my hand. Somehow I knew my life was being changed forever.

"Shall I go with you to tell the priest?" he asked.

"No," I sighed, "I'll go alone."

I turned and looked into his eyes, full of tears. Standing next to him was our three-year-old daughter. I knelt down and gazed into her face and wanted so badly to take her in my arms. But I didn't. I said saying nothing. What could I say? I stood and looked again at my husband. He touched my shoulder, and with my good hand, I touched his. It would be our final touch.

Five years have passed, and no one has touched me since, until today.

The priest didn't touch me. He looked at my hand, now wrapped in a rag. He looked at my face, now shadowed in sorrow. I've never faulted him for what he said. He was only doing as he was instructed. He covered his mouth and extended his hand, palm forward. "You are unclean," he told me. With one pronouncement I lost my family, my home, my future, my friends.

My husband met me at the city gates with a sack of clothing and bread and coins. He didn't speak. By now friends had gathered. What I saw in their eyes was precursor to what I've seen in every eye since: fearful pity. As I stepped out, they stepped back. Their horror of my disease was greater than their concern for my heart - so they, and everyone else I have seen since, stepped back.

Oh, how I repulsed those who saw me. Five years of leprosy had left my hands gnarled. Tips of my fingers were missing, as were portions of an ear and my nose. At the sight of me, fathers grabbed their children. Mothers covered their faces. Children pointed and stared.

The rags on my body couldn't hide my sores. Nor could the wrap on my face hide the rage in my eyes. I didn't even try to hide it. How many nights did I shake my crippled fist at the silent sky? "What did I do to deserve this?" But never a reply.

Some think I sinned. Some think my parents sinned. I don't know. All I know is that I grew so tired of it all: sleeping in the colony, smelling the stench. I grew so tired of the damnable bell I was required to wear around my neck to warn people of my presence. As if I needed it. One glance and the announcements began, "Unclean! Unclean! Unclean!"

Several weeks ago I dared walk the road to my village. I had no intent of entering. Heaven knows I only wanted to look again upon my home. And see, perchance, my husband working in the field. I did not see him. But I did see some children playing a pasture. I hid behind a tree and watched them scamper and run. Their faces were so joyful and their laughter so contagious that for a moment, for just a moment, I was no longer a leper. I was a friend. I was a mother. I was a woman.

Infused with their happiness, I stepped out from behind the tree, straightened my back, breathed deeply ... and they saw me. Before I could retreat, they saw me. And they screamed. And they scattered. One lingered, though, behind the others. One paused and looked in my direction. I don't know, and I can't say for sure, but I think, I really think, she was my daughter. And I don't know, I really can't say for sure. But I think she was looking for her mother.

That look is what made me take the step I took today. Of course it was reckless. I know it was risky. But what did I have to lose? He calls himself God's Son. Either he will hear my complaint and kill me or accept my demands and heal me. Those were my thoughts. I came to him as defiant. Moved not by faith but by a desperate anger. God had wrought this calamity on my body, and he would either fix it or end it.

But then I saw him, and when I saw him, I was changed. You must remember, I'm a peasant, not a poet, so I can't find the words to describe what I saw. All I can say is that the Judean mornings are sometimes so fresh and the sunrises so glorious that to look at them is to forget the heat of the day before and the hurt of times past. When I looked at his face, I saw a Judean morning.

Before he spoke, I knew he cared. Somehow, I knew he hated this disease as much as, no—more—than I do. My rage became trust, and my anger became hope.

From behind a rock, I watched him descend a hill. Throngs of people followed him. I waited until he was only paces from me, then I stepped out.

"Master!"

He stopped and looked in my direction, as did dozens of others. A flood of fear swept across the crowd. Arms flew in front of faces. Children ducked behind parents. "Unclean!" someone shouted. Again, I don't blame them. I was a huddled mass of death. But I scarcely heard them. I scarcely saw them. Their panic I'd seen a thousand times. His compassion, however, I'd never beheld. Everyone stepped back except him. He stepped toward me. Toward me.

Five years ago my husband had stepped toward me. He was the last to do so. Now Jesus did. I didn't move. I just spoke. "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." Had he healed me with a word, I would have been thrilled. Had he cured me with a prayer, I would have rejoiced. But he wasn't satisfied with speaking to me. He drew near me...he reached out... and he touched me.

"I do choose." His words were as tender as his touch. "Be healed!"

Energy flooded my body like water through a furrowed field. In an instant, in a moment, I felt warmth where there had been numbness. I felt strength where there had been atrophy. My back straightened, and my head lifted. Where I had been eye level with his belt, I now stood eye level with his face. His smiling face.

He cupped his hands on my cheeks and drew me so near I could feel the warmth of his breath and see the tears in his own eyes. "Don't tell anyone about this. But go and show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded for people who are made well. This will show the people what I have done."

And so that is where I am going. I will show myself to the priest and embrace him. I will show myself to my husband, and I will embrace him. I will pick up my daughter, and I will hold her so close. And I will never forget the one who dared to touch me. He could have healed me with a word. But he wanted to do more than heal me. He wanted to honor me, to validate me, to christen me.

Imagine that ... unworthy of the touch of a man, yet worthy of the touch of God.

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<sup>i</sup> Max Lucado. Just Like Jesus. Nashville, TN. Word Publishing. 1998