

## **Luke 5.12-16**

### *Mistakes and Mercy (Part 1)*

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*<sup>12</sup>In one of the villages, Jesus met a man with an advanced case of leprosy. When the man saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground, begging to be healed. "Lord," he said, "if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean."*

*<sup>13</sup>Jesus reached out and touched him. "I am willing," he said. "Be healed!" And instantly the leprosy disappeared. <sup>14</sup>Then Jesus instructed him not to tell anyone what had happened. He said, "Go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed."*

*<sup>15</sup>But despite Jesus' instructions, the report of his power spread even faster, and vast crowds came to hear him preach and to be healed of their diseases. <sup>16</sup>But Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer.*

## **A Miraculous Inheritance**

- **Imagine that one day you woke up to an email** with news that you had a great aunt, whom you had no idea existed, and who also happened to be extravagantly wealthy. And imagine if that email also included the news that she had recently passed away, and that for some mysterious reason, she had left most of her considerable resources to you. *What would you do with it all?* (Debts, houses, holiday, philanthropy)
- But in dealing with all that wealth and how it should be distributed, who it might be dispersed amongst, you'd probably also begin to notice very quickly the *influence* this new situation had on those around you, how people related to you once they found out about your resources; not only your friends, but even perfect strangers.
- That little fantasy perhaps gives us a window into some of what is going on in this episode, and to begin to understand relationship dynamics at play, and we'll come back to this little fantasy again in a few moments.

## Expansion

- The beginning of Luke chapter five is all about *expansion*. Earlier St Luke tells us that Jesus is now preaching in the open air beside the Sea of Galilee. Huge crowds have come to listen to him as news of a miracle worker is spreading.
- *Expansion* is of course a theme right in the middle of the previous episode about Jesus borrowing Simon-Peter's fishing boat to teach because of the crowds, and the massive and miraculous catch of fish, and then Jesus' invitation for the first disciples to follow. The catch of fish being a picture to signal that whatever *was* in place to contain God's action was now bursting at the seams through Jesus' life, overflowing in the lives of his first followers invited into that expansive reality.
- And the fish, as Jesus says to his first disciples, are just the beginning – *everyone is going to be caught up in what God does next*.

## Mistaking the Miracle

- But along with this rapid expansion, and the news about Jesus going everywhere because of the miracles and message, comes the potential for misunderstanding.
- Jesus is obviously able to do things other people can't; he's got power that changes lives, there are healings and miracles that come along with all this. (And Jesus' message is about God's rule coming to town and people like the sound of that - perhaps Jesus will pick a fight with Rome and win).
- But the question is: is Jesus being known and heard as he intends? *Why* is Jesus becoming popular?
- One of the strange things about the story we just read is not only that Jesus heals the man with leprosy, but that he gives the man strict instructions to keep the miracle to himself. Why the secrecy?
- In this story it looks as though Jesus isn't all that interested in being known for how many miracles he can work, nor the attention it attracts.

- We see Jesus often retreating from the crowds to pray, as with this scene, reluctant to be the center of a miracle movement, and attentive to the private intimacy he shares his Father amidst the public attention.
- Jesus doesn't seem interested in blowing people away with impressive quick fixes. He has a sense of how power changes relationship dynamics. With all this excitement, *how* are people learning to relate to him? And through him to God?
- These sorts of questions linger even more so in behind the Gospel of Mark, for example. At every turn in Mark's gospel Jesus seems to be keeping a kind of secret about his identity to himself; and the moment he reveals it, the moment Jesus states most clearly that he is in fact one with God, is not when he's working spectacular miracles, but when he stands in the place of the victim, at the mercy of his enemies the night before his execution.
- The whole arc of St Mark's biography of Jesus draws us toward this moment, as if Jesus is saying, "I'm going to show you what God's character is *really like*. Don't be distracted by the miracles and power that comes with the territory, let me show you the very heart of God; not by intimidating or overwhelming you, but through sacrificial love, through solidarity with the failed and broken."
- And so what comes through in Mark's gospel is the startling clarity of *a redefinition of power*. God, as we remembered at Easter, is not where we expect God to be, reorienting the world through Jesus' vision of loving humble service – that's where the real power lies, that's how true change is made possible.
- **Imagine with me again that little fantasy about becoming extravagantly rich overnight.** In that position of extreme privilege, how would we choose to go about our lives? Would impressing people by overtly splashing cash wherever we go deepen our intimate relationships? Would that get us any closer to genuine connection with strangers or neighbours? Would acting like the big shot help to introduce others to an understanding of who we really are; what our character really is? Would all that flash help people get to know the real you? Or would all that indiscretion do the opposite?

- These kinds of questions might help to draw out what is going on Mark's gospel, and in the story we've just read about the healing of a man with leprosy in this story. And maybe that gets us a little closer to understanding why Jesus so often instructs people *not to "go public"* with the miracles they'd experienced, as with this story.
- Perhaps it's not all about the *miracles*, but instead it's about getting to know, learning how to relate to the character in the *middle of the miracles*.

### Understanding the Miracle

- But if Jesus isn't interested in becoming popular or influential because of impressive miracles, if he's mindful about the use of power and what it tells people about God, why do miracles happen around Jesus in the first place?
- **Imagine yourself again in that little fantasy where you have more money than God.**  
But this time imagine a specific instance, the everyday experience of being at a checkout at a grocery store. You're behind a dishevelled young woman with three even more dishevelled looking, unruly children. *She's* buying no-name diapers, cheap bulk food and is clearly on a very tight budget, and is looking rather anxious. *You're* on your way to a board meeting for one of the many charities you've set up, but you're stuck behind this woman who's struggling with her children just trying to get through the line-up. It's taking forever, and finally, once everything has been bagged up, she tries to pay with her credit card, but it's declined, and so is the next one, and so is the one after that. The kids are crying, the line-up is growing behind you and it's embarrassing and heartbreaking. She turns and catches your eye and she doesn't say anything, but the desperation and hopelessness is evident, she's right on the verge of tears. What do you do in that moment, with all your resources? *You pay!*
- Some have suggested that this is a little bit like what we see happening in many of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels. He's not healing or helping people to impress or prove some kind of point, in fact he refuses to prove himself in his home town when people demand he works a miracle to win them over.

- Rather than flexing his miracle muscles in order to wow people, Jesus is simply responding to what moves him, as he also moves toward his broader mission. Some have described many of the miracles as “flashes of compassion” that burst out almost as if Jesus almost can’t help it.
- And so perhaps the very reason Jesus isn’t interested in being known for his impressive power, is the same reason the miracles happen in the first place. *Because of his character*; because God’s love is coming through the life of Jesus, and God won’t overwhelm or coerce, but that doesn’t mean God isn’t involved, interested or moved.
- So what we get through Jesus is a picture of God as compassionate and patient; someone who refuses to dazzle and electrify in order to elicit obedience or love. Rather, we are given a picture of God who is interested in *truly relating*. Jesus’ actions, all through the gospel stories, make possible relation and connection from God to persons, and persons to persons. *That* kind of healing, *that* kind of intimacy isn’t brought about through pyrotechnics.

## Reconnection

- And that, I’d suggest, is precisely the case with this story about the man who is healed of leprosy. Even in this one interaction, this one life, Jesus is drawing out wholeness and connection, not spectacle.
- Leprosy was and is a horrible condition. The man St Luke describes has an advanced case of leprosy, which means he had been literally rotting away alone for years (might he not have even had a nose?). In Jesus’ day people with this condition were totally ostracized; they had to live away from others, they were considered “unclean” physically and religiously, banished from regular human community.
- We’ve already talked about how St Luke is showing us a Jesus who helps the non-belonger to belong, and the man with leprosy is a prime example of a non-belonger.
- So after Jesus heals him, Jesus gives the man instructions on what to do next. And everything he tells him, about going to the priest to get what you could call an official

clean bill of health, has to do with this man being reinstated into the regular life of his community. If the priest can vouch that the man is “clean”, he can re-enter society.

- *That’s what Jesus is all about* – bringing about reconciliation, connection, wholeness. And this episode is another hint at what Jesus does for humanity itself.

### **I am willing**

- The key words in this scene are Jesus’ first words to the man with leprosy. After the man begs Jesus to help him we, hear Jesus say, *“I am willing”*.
- And along with Jesus’ words come the totally inappropriate action of touching the man. The very last thing you ever did was to touch someone with leprosy for fear of contamination. So how long had this man been living without human contact?
- *Jesus touches him. “I am willing”*. And Jesus isn’t contaminated, he instead infects the man with life and healing.
- That’s a wonderful picture in itself of how we each relate to Jesus in our need, in our brokenness and sin. When we come to God - alone, desperate, longing for connection, wasting away - through Jesus’ life God kneels down, touches us and makes real connection possible again.
- *And that’s what this story is all about*. It’s not about a kind of pyrotechnic God, egotistically blowing us away, demanding our subservience (not *The Good News about Avenger Jesus: Endgame*).
- This is a story about a character who turns up in our little village with good news and relates to us in ways we can understand, opening up the possibility for connection and wholeness, not only with God, but with those around us.
- It’s through stories like this along with many others that remind us that Jesus doesn’t only offer us the possibility of connection and relation to God. Jesus makes possible connection and relation person to person, community to community by showing us who God really is and living a vision of true humanity – a humanity that doesn’t recoil but reaches.

- That is a renewing work for which the world longs. And in our deep longing for this we hear Jesus say, “I am willing. I am willing to make relation, connection, wholeness possible.” - Perhaps those are words some of us need to hear today.
- Faith in God as known through Jesus tells us that God never recoils from us, no matter how grotesque we might feel, how isolated or ostracized. When we open up, even a little, longing for connection, for wholeness in the very depths of our person, God responds with “*I am willing*”. God never recoils, God always reconnects.

### **We are willing**

- Let’s go back to that fantasy about becoming wealthy overnight just one more time. Part of our being in Jesus’ family is understanding that along with his death and resurrection does come a *wildly extravagant* inheritance of new life.
- St Paul wrote to one early Christian community: “*You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was very rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.*” (2 Corinthians 8.9)
- And then Paul goes on to encourage this community to be generous not only in spirit but practically also. Effectively *to be willing*, because of Jesus, and along with Jesus to kneel down with those around them to touch who Jesus would touch, to say to the face of desperation and hopelessness “*We are willing.*”
- We are willing to give and share and help others so others can get to know God through *our character*. We are willing to relate to and touch the untouchable we come across. We are willing to do things Jesus’ way, which doesn’t mean demanding, or overwhelming or coercing people, but through the daily, consistent sharing of ordinary grace in ordinary moments in unnamed villages. (Luke 5.12)
- “*I have been helped by many Christians. And so I wanted to become one.*” (Lulu)
- The life of a Christian, of the Church, is not usually a life full of pyrotechnics, though sometimes they do pop up from time to time. But many days it’s just ordinary *persons willing* to be generous with their inheritance, finding ways to relate and connect, kneeling down and touching, and to letting God do with that what God will.

### Questions for Discussion:

- What stood out to you in this story?
- What else might this story point us to in terms of the big story of scripture?
- What does it mean to hear God say “I am willing”? In what ways can we say “we are willing” to people on the margins?

### Extra Thoughts from Luke

Because our time on Sundays together is limited the many questions about healing and miracles that might have sprung to mind may have gone unanswered. I attempted to give insight into what was going on in Luke 5.12-16 and in other scenes in the Gospels relating to Jesus' miracles of healing. I do not believe these reflections answer all our questions about miracles and healing today, though I do believe they help us on our way in understanding the character in the middle of them, which is essential. If we don't get Jesus right we'll end up going in strange directions in our thinking about God. So, it's important we start there. However, I am sure many in our community will no doubt have prayed for healing and not received it, or perhaps have! Though our thinking may vary about miracles and healing (and there's room in our community for variation) I would venture three further thoughts on the subject that might bring clarity. They may not help you, but they have helped me.

First, God is gracious and Jesus himself tells us we can ask for things in his name and expect to receive good gifts from a good Father (John 14.13, Luke 11.11). So, whenever I pray with people I simply ask that - I appeal to God's good character like a simple child and ask for healing and wholeness. After that, it's up to God; not up to how much "faith" I work up into some kind of weird frenzy. Another good word for faith is trust. We trust God together and leave ourselves in God's hands. That is what our faith is about, a deepening trust in the one who made us.

This leads me to a second thought - what happens if we don't experience healing as we'd like? It would seem that even the heroes of the New Testament didn't always get what they asked for. Think of Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, for example. A giant of the faith and yet even Paul suffered (what with exactly we don't know but it does appear to be some kind of physical or mental affliction). For Paul the path to further life was through suffering, and that of course should remind us of Jesus. The night before his death Jesus asked the Father to remove the cup of suffering he was to drink (Luke 22) and Jesus ends up drinking what he obviously would rather have avoided - going to his death on the cross. "Not my will, but your will" we hear him say. This is the kind of trust Paul was modelling. So, although these examples don't provide answers to our specific situations they do remind us that if we are suffering we're not suffering because we've done something wrong, or God doesn't love us, or we aren't praying hard enough. Many times suffering and holiness, at least it seems biblically, somehow go together. Just because we don't experience healing right now does not mean we aren't holy or connected to God. In fact, we may be more connected to God than we realize (just ask a mature Christian who has suffered with chronic pain or has faced the death of a child, and I can point you toward several who would gladly share their experience of a deepening and lively faith in the middle of all that pain).

That brings me to a third thought. Part of the hope of heaven is wholeness and healing for all of God's creation, and any miracle of healing is a pointing toward that future reality. So, even if we don't



experience healing and wholeness exactly as we'd like right now, that is our eternal future in and with Christ (Revelation 21.4).

Because I know many in our church have faced or are facing suffering, I felt it important to at least add a little more to the discussion. I don't have all the answers, but I know how much damage can be done when we end up off track on these sorts of topics or are insensitive toward one another.

My prayer for you today is that you would know the wholeness and peace of Christ that mysteriously goes beyond understanding.