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“I do will it. Be made clean” (Luke 5:13).

1 John 5:5-13; Luke 5:12-16

After Jesus identified himself and his ministry with the messianic text in Isaiah 61, filled with the Spirit and anointed to bring good news, liberation and healing to God’s people, he proceeds to do just that. He returns from Nazareth to Capernaum, where he exorcises a man in the synagogue, heals Peter’s mother-in-law, then a host of other sick and possessed people. He demonstrates his power over nature itself with a miraculous catch of fish on the lake, prompting Peter, James and John to follow him.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus heals a leper in an encounter that reveals the growing pressure he is under from religious authorities and even from the crowds, who are pursuing him for miracles and because they believe he is the messiah sent to restore Israel to its former glory. This misunderstanding will force Jesus to adjust his public ministry and to begin to prepare his disciples for his coming suffering and death as a different kind of messiah.

The leper suffers from a skin disease that has separated him from his family and excluded him from the social and religious life of the community. He also bears the stigma of believing his disease is punishment from God for some fault. The leper’s

plea for help suggests that he is not sure Jesus will heal him because of this: “*If you will, you can heal me.*” Jesus immediately reaches out and touches him, rendering himself unclean, and says, “*I do will it. Be made clean.*” He heals both his leprosy and his distorted image of God.

This miracle only adds to the frenzy of the crowds and criticism from the clergy. To satisfy their legal scruples, Jesus orders the man to report to them to be restored to the community and to not tell anyone, an unlikely outcome. The irony of the story is that by restoring an outcast Jesus himself becomes an outcast, forced to retreat to the wilderness. The more he proclaims God’s mercy, the more jealous resentment and hostility he encounters from those who use religion to control people by instilling fear of God.

The pandemic has given us all an experience of how crisis can divide people and make caring for one another more challenging. Despite the risks, many healthcare workers help the sick and those grieving or suffering from isolation and loneliness. Crisis can also strengthen community, and the hope is that we will come out of this pandemic stronger and more aware of the need for solidarity and selfless love. All disciples share in the anointing of Jesus to bring good news to the poor, freedom to captives and compassion for the oppressed. The Spirit helps us discern how and when to best use our gifts to serve others. When we encounter suffering, Jesus inspires us to be willing and eager to respond, whatever the cost.

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