

## **Children**

Good morning, boys and girls. Isn't this a nice lamp I brought with me? This is a very special kind of lamp. It doesn't have any buttons to push or click. If you want to turn it on, you just touch it. (Demonstrate) See how simple it is? Just the lightest touch can turn the lamp on or off. One little touch and it goes from light to dark, or from dark to light. If you try to use a piece of paper, or a pencil, or anything else to touch the lamp, it won't turn on. But if you just touch it with your hand, it comes on right away.

Our Bible story today is about a very special kind of touch. There was a man who was very sick with a disease called leprosy. No one would get near him or touch him. But he came to Jesus and asked Jesus to heal him. And Jesus reached out and touched the man, and he was healed. The leprosy went away. Just like a touch of your hand can change darkness to light, Jesus touched this man's life and changed it from sad to happy. That's how powerful Jesus is. You know, Jesus loves each of us just as much as He loved that man with leprosy. And Jesus wants to touch our lives, too, and take away our sadness. He can't reach out and touch us like He did that man, but His Spirit can come into our hearts and touch us like that. Let's pray and ask Jesus to touch our lives like He did for the sick man.

I

So often people write positive thoughts and wishes. The purveyors of "positive thinking" like to tell us that if we want something badly enough we can get it, no matter what it is. All we need is the desire, the hunger, the commitment, and if we have these three things, we can accomplish whatever we want. If we fail to achieve our goal, it is only because we didn't want it badly enough.

Positive thinking has much to recommend it, but it has its limitations. One such limitation is this: we cannot always have what we want "just because we want it." All the girls in the Miss America contest want to be Miss America but only one gets to wear the crown. The crown becomes hers not because she wanted it more than anybody else there, but because somebody gave it to her; and who in the world knows (really) how they decide which girl to give it to? They never pick the ones I like. All the young men who try to be professional athletes want to make the team, but most of them get cut because of their size, their ability or lack of it, and their injuries. All the men running for President of the United States want to be President but they get the Office, not because of their great desire for it, but rather because a majority of the voters give it to them. Just wanting to do something, to be something, to have something, is not enough to make it happen. What can happen for us is limited by the weaknesses in ourselves and in the world around us.

It is idolatry to believe that we can "do anything we want to do." We are not almighty. We are limited in power. Only God is almighty. Only God has limitless power. Only God can do whatever he wants to do. The scriptures tell us that in God's hand are power and might (1 Chronicles 29:12). Only with God are all things possible (Matthew 19:26).

In his Gospel Saint John tells us about a man who wanted with all his heart to be healthy but couldn't make it happen. "If you wish, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean."

Of course he did, but the man couldn't do it because of his weakness. The man wanted to be healed but merely desiring it was not enough to make it happen. So Jesus healed him. Like God, Jesus has the power to do whatever he wants to do because he is God.

There's a big difference between what we can do and what God can do. Peter learned this lesson the hard way. Peter and the rest of the disciples were in a boat out on Lake Galilee. There was a storm and they were in trouble. Jesus was not with them but he saw their plight and came to them, walking on the water. When the disciples first saw him, they were scared out of their minds, thinking he was a ghost. The Lord assured them he was not. Peter asked to walk on the water with him. He wanted to walk on the water. He made it a few steps and then began to sink. His desire was not enough to keep him up. Jesus could do it because he is God and can do anything. Peter, the man, was limited by his weakness (Matthew 14:29).

We are limited not only by our own weakness but also by weakness in the world around us and our desire cannot change that. In the book of 1 Kings we read about a widow

and her son who were powerless to do anything about their fate. They had run out of food. Everybody had run out of food. There was a famine in the land and people were dropping like flies. The widow had enough left for one meal and after she and her son ate that, they were going to lie down and die. She did not want to die; she wanted to live. She wanted to eat and to feed her son. But she couldn't make it happen. There just one thing wasn't any food anywhere and all the wanting in the world would not change that. God fed her. For days and days and days he always gave her just enough to feed herself, her son and one guest, a prophet whom God sent to her (1 Kings 17). We cannot do whatever we want "just because we want it." God can! "Our God does whatever he pleases," David confessed (Psalm 115:3).

In our Gospel lesson we have a beautiful testimony to the almighty power of Jesus, our Savior, power only God has. A leper came to Jesus for healing. He wanted to be free from that ugly disease but he couldn't do anything about it. Back then nobody could do anything about it. Remember the reaction of Israel's king in our Old Testament lesson? The King of Syria sent a man to him with instructions to heal him of his leprosy. Israel's King was overwhelmed by the request. He tore his robes and asked, "Am I God, that I can heal this man?" Nobody could do anything about leprosy. The poor leper came to Jesus and, kneeling in front of the Lord, he begged for healing, saying, "If I had to pick you want to, you can make me clean." The poor leper knew that Jesus had almighty power. The Lord was moved with pity and, stretching out his hand, he touched the leper and said, "I want to make you well; be clean!" And immediately he was healed. Jesus is the almighty God and he has almighty power.

"All power has been given unto me in heaven and on earth," Jesus said (Matthew 28:18). "He was declared to be the Son of God with power by his Resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). God has given him power over all flesh, power to give eternal life to all who believe in him (John 17:2).

Confessing the almighty power of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ is not really hard to do. There is much evidence to support our confession. What is hard, however, is to understand why God doesn't use his power the way we want him to, to do the things we want him to do. If God has all power, then why do things that we consider evil still happen? Even the children are able to grasp this difficulty because they ask, "If God can do anything, why doesn't he make sin go away?" Things happen that make no sense to us at all and we sign in powerlessness, "Why doesn't God do something?"

There are no easy answers to such questions. We begin to understand why God does things the way he does when we learn what it is that God truly wants for us. What he wants for us is something far greater than what we typically want for ourselves. We want to be spoiled; we want to have what we want even if it might hurt us. God wants us to be like him and with him.

The Bible tells us what God wants for us. God wants us to be his children (John 1:13). He wants to deliver us from this present evil age (Galatians 1:4). He wants us to be holy (1 Thessalonians 4:3). He wants us to do right, even if we get hurt because of it (1 Peter 2:15 and 3:17). He wants us to hope in Christ, to believe in our Savior and trust him

alone and nothing (or no one) else (Ephesians 1:11). He wants us to live with him forever (John 14:2).

Saint Paul knew there is a great difference between what we want and what God wants. Three times Paul pleaded with God about the same thing, asking to be healed of his "thorn in the flesh." Three times he was turned down. Still, the apostle confessed, "The will of God is good and perfect and acceptable" (Romans 12:2). Things happen and God appears to do nothing about it because he doesn't do what we want him to do. God does do something; he does what he wants, what he knows will make his greatest wish for us happen: our salvation.

Because we are God's children who know he loves us and has made us his own, we accept what he wants for us even though it hurts sometimes. We pray in our prayers, "thy will be done," just as our Lord Jesus himself prayed it. Jesus of Nazareth, the man, was powerless in his weakness to do anything but to place himself in his Father's care. He didn't want to die but he knew he had to, so he prayed, "Not my will but thine be done." Not what I want, Father, but what you want. What God wanted is exactly what happened. Jesus died, and because of it we are saved. Jesus came back to life again and because of it we have a home in heaven. By doing it God's way, accepting what God wanted, Jesus was glorified and now his name is greater than any other name, a name at which every knee will bow in heaven, on earth and under the earth. What God wanted for Jesus was best for him and also for us. What God wants for us is best for us also, even when we can't see it. To do what is best for us is that for which God uses his almighty power.

## II

When Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale debated one another on national television (notice I am avoiding more recent elections), it was striking to see and hear how both held back from pressing hard with pet arguments all of us knew they cherished. It was clear both were considering their audiences. What "played well" in Atlanta might not do so well in Minneapolis. What you would say to women you might not say to longshoremen. To the elderly or to the upwardly mobile the messages may not be similar. Except on national television in prime time when you're debating.

Some of us smiled -- smirked, even -- to see how carefully each candidate stepped through the land mines laid by his opponent and the press. But both knew well that there is no point giving undue offense to someone who might become your advocate.

Paul knew the same. Without dishonesty we need to learn that style as well....

Anyone who has ever worked with complex systems is familiar with the law of unintended consequences. You attempt something beneficial but it leads to something else unforeseen that is terrible.

For example, a couple of decades ago, the fashionable mantra among environmentalists was, "Save the trees! Use plastic instead of paper!"

Today New York City alone goes through more than 5 billion plastic bags each year, which pollute the seas and highways, and endanger fish and wildlife. The law of unintended consequences people start out with an idea that sounds quite sensible save the trees but something unexpected and quite undesirable results.

We've seen it happen in the medical field. The advent of antibiotics saved millions of lives, so doctors began freely prescribing antibiotics at the sign of a sniffle. But germs are now building up a resistance to antibiotics, especially in medical facilities, to the point that your local hospital may actually be a very dangerous place to go when you are sick. The law of unintended consequences.

It happens in every field. Farmers watch their crops being devoured by insects, so they reach for a spray gun and blast them with pesticide. And it works for a time. But then the crop damage returns, worse than ever, and the pesticide that was so successful has no more effect. Meanwhile the insect that was eating the crops had also been competing with another insect. While insect no. 1 was out of the way, insect no. 2 began having a field day. And the law of unintended consequences is proved once more. (1)

In 1990, the Australian state of Victoria made safety helmets mandatory for all bicycle riders. Wonderful idea. However, while there was a reduction in the number of head injuries, there was also an unintended reduction in the number of juvenile cyclists youths considered wearing a bicycle helmet unfashionable. A new study suggests that the decrease in exercise caused by reduced cycling as a result of helmet laws results in more health problems than riding without a helmet. (2) [Let me hasten to say, helmets

are a good idea.] But the law of unintended consequences will get you sooner or later when you are seeking to do something beneficial. It even got Jesus once upon a time.

This was at the very beginning of his ministry. A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

Mark tells us that Jesus was indignant. That's interesting, don't you think? Do you remember any other time when Jesus was indignant?

Was it because the man was breaking the law by coming directly up to him? This was a total violation of the rules and regulations concerning lepers in that society. Because of his medical condition the man with leprosy was supposed to shout, "Unclean!" to keep Jesus away! But instead he runs up to Jesus. I'm sure that the people around were surprised at his actions and similarly surprised that Jesus did not run away when he approached. That's one reason why Jesus may have been indignant.

A more likely explanation is that healing was not Jesus' core mission. His mission was much larger. His mission was to teach and preach about the kingdom of God. His mission was to heal the world. And he knew he did not have much time to accomplish all that he was sent to do. Healing people one at a time would slow him down considerably. He had compassion, but he also had a mission.

Or maybe it was the way the man phrased his request. On his knees the man begged, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Are you willing? Didn't the man know that Jesus was always willing to heal? Jesus always wants the best for people.

Have you ever prayed, "O God, if it be your will, then please do such-and-such . . ."? God's will is always for our best good. There may be circumstances that we are not aware of that keeps God's will being exercised at the moment we ask, but God never wills anything except our best good.

Of course we can't know what was going through Jesus' mind. All Mark says is that Jesus was indignant when the man came up and asked to be healed.

And yet, Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the man. "I am willing," he says. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left the man and he was cleansed.

We see something very important about leprosy in the terminology which the man with leprosy and Jesus use. The man with leprosy doesn't ask to be healed. He says, "If you are willing, you can make me CLEAN."

And when Jesus responds to his request, he says, "I am willing, be CLEAN!"

One word that has attached itself to the disease of leprosy even unto modern times in the word "Unclean."

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen once told a humorous story about a well-dressed woman with a rather affected accent who called on him one evening. She explained to Bishop Sheen: "I would like to become a Catholic, but I would not want any ordinary priest to instruct me, for I am an intellectual. Knowing your background, would you intellectualize your faith for me?"

"Madam," Bishop Sheen answered, "I am willing to instruct anyone who comes to me. As a matter of fact, a young man with leprosy who just finished instructions sat in that very chair on which you are seated now."

Sheen says that dear woman literally flew out of the house and he never heard from her again. (3)

That's been the reaction to leprosy, or Hansen's Disease as it is more properly known, and lepers since biblical times. Unclean. *According to the Guinness World Records 2004*, leprosy is the oldest recorded disease. Archeologists have found written accounts of leprosy dating back to 1350 B. C. in Egypt. (4) And ever since it was first observed, it has been regarded with dread, and it has been associated with the word "unclean."

Besides causing the body to be covered with unsightly sores, leprosy breaks down the nervous system. According to writer Phillip Yancey the nerve endings cease to send signals of pain, and the body is damaged by actions as simple as wearing cramped shoes or grasping a splintered rake. "Pressure sores form, infection sets in, and no pain signals alert the person to tend the wounded area." They have no feeling in parts of their body. So the affected person is vulnerable to losing fingers or toes or even a nose because they have no way of knowing an infection has set in. Often they go blind, because they do not know to blink when dust gets in their eye.

Before long, the leper hardly looks human. No fingers. No toes. Face disappearing. Isolated from others. No one wants to draw near, no one wants to touch. And in a sense, the person with this terrible disease can't touch, for they no longer can feel the touch of another person. A leper in the Old Testament was considered unfit to be in God's presence worshiping (see Leviticus 11 through 15).

Unclean. There was no cure. And so the only thing to do with such persons was to isolate them so they could not infect others. We saw the same phenomenon when the AIDS epidemic hit a few years ago to a certain extent. Fear. The desire to isolate those affected. Worse than the disease itself was the ostracizing that went with it.

Did you notice in the reading of scripture the remarkable fact that Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man with leprosy as he said, "I am willing. Be clean!"

There were times when Jesus healed people by simply saying a word. And yet he reached out and touched this man with this repulsive disease. Mark tells us that immediately the man was healed. Don't you imagine that the fact that Jesus reached out and touched him was part of the man's healing? It was important that he be healed

emotionally as well as physically, and touching can have wonderful healing powers with regard to the heart.

The man with leprosy says to the Master, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the man. "I am willing," he says. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left the man and he was cleansed. And then Jesus ran into the law of unintended consequences.

Jesus sent this healed man away with a strong warning. Notice that. He doesn't offer a suggestion. Jesus sent this man away with a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

What was there about this warning, "See that you don't tell this to anyone . . ." that this man did not understand? "Instead," Mark tells us, "he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news.

As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere . . ."

Jesus was already becoming an unintended rock star rabbi. People were flocking to him from near and far. And this man healed from leprosy added fuel to the flames. This may have seriously hampered Jesus' ministry. Even worse, it probably shortened Christ's ministry because it could not help but draw the attention of both the religious authorities and the Roman authorities. They could not help but see someone who might cause them trouble if his following kept growing.

Of course, it's all understandable. Jesus could not help but heal this man, even if it was not part of his core mission. Jesus' nature was pure, unconditional love. So, of course, he was going to reach out to help someone in need, even if it wasn't in his own best interest. And, of course, this deliriously happy man who had been healed of this terrible scourge was going to tell his family, friends and everyone in earshot. Wouldn't you? It was just the law of unintended consequences, even if it did hasten the time when Jesus would hang on a cross.

But there is something we need to remember before we leave this place. According to scripture, there was a time when each of us was unclean. We were isolated from God and we were isolated from one another. But, on the cross, Christ reached out and touched each of us and made us clean. But rather than telling us not to tell anyone about it, he tells us to go tell the world. If you have found healing from Christ in any way, tell your family, tell your friends, tell everyone within earshot.

And if there is anyone within your sphere of influence who is socially isolated for any reason, please reach out to them as Christ has reached out to you.



Mother Teresa, a woman who worked with lepers throughout her career in Calcutta, spoke of this once. She said, "We have drugs for people with diseases like leprosy. But these drugs do not treat the main problem, the disease of being unwanted." (5)

It is a disease, isn't it? The disease of being unwanted may be the most deadly disease of all. I wonder if many gang members don't spread the disease of drugs and violence because they are infected with the disease of being unwanted. I wonder if many people lost in a fog of alcoholism or depression don't suffer to some extent from this same terrible disease. You can do the work of Jesus by simply reaching out in love especially with the power of touch to those who are alone.

A man with leprosy begs the Master, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the man. "I am willing," he says. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left the man and he was cleansed. We can be a healing force in our community. We can do it through the power of love in Jesus' name.

1. Edward Russell-Walling, *50 Management Ideas You Really Need to Know* (London: Quercus, 2007), p. 172.
2. Faith Popcorn and Adam Hanft, *Dictionary of the Future* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), p. 340.
3. *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), p. 264.
4. Edited by Claire Folkard, et. al. (Guinness World Records Limited, 2003), p. 14. 5. Phillip Yancey, *Soul Survivor* (New York: Doubleday), p 76

King Duncan

### III

**Marty Springstead, supervisor of American League umpires, said he will never forget his first assignment behind the plate. It was in a 1966 game at Washington. Frank Howard 6'8" 290 pounds was playing for the Senators, and on the first pitch to the mountainous slugger, Springstead called a knee-high fast ball a strike. Howard turned around and yelled, "Get something straight, buster! I don't know where you came from or how you got to the major leagues, but they don't call that pitch on me a strike. Understand?" The next pitch was in the same spot, and Springstead yelled, "Two!" "Two what?" Howard roared. "Too low," Springstead said, "Much too low."**

**For most of us we have had our own David and Goliath story. When we were younger usually the result was just the opposite, we the little guy lost. Our parents used to tell us that "Sticks and stones may break our bones but names will never hurt us." I don't know about you, but I think names can hurt. Today's first reading is about a group of people who were bullied legally by their society**

This Sunday's first reading from the *Book of Leviticus* gives just a few of the horrible rules established by the Mosaic community to protect itself from leprosy. In the ancient times leprosy was believed to be deforming, incurable and contagious. Leprosy included most skin disorders: Hanson's disease which is leprosy proper, psoriasis, skin cancer, impetigo, boils and even serious acne. Lepers were ostracized by their families and neighbors, and forced to live outside the villages and towns. They were referred to as the Living Dead. (Not the walking dead) Lepers had to wear ragged clothes. They had to let their hair go uncombed and uncut. As today's reading says, they had to cover their mouths with one hand and call out "Unclean, unclean" as they walked. Anyone who came into any contact whatsoever with a leper was considered to be unclean like the leper.

And Jesus, moved with pity, stretched out his hand, touched the leper, and said to him, "Be made clean." Jesus did not see the unclean leper, or his disease. He was not concerned with the strict prohibitions of Jewish society. Jesus did not see a leper at all; he saw a human soul in desperate need. He saw someone who was a reject of society. Someone who was bullied.

Gossiping about someone is a form of bullying. The person gossiped about becomes unclean and ostracized by those around them. A recent article states that people who are ostracized – not talked to or ignored at work – suffer more than people who are bullied by coworkers. How does Jesus react to the victim and therefore to all who have suffered from bullying or ostracism.

He stretched out his hand and touched him. He healed him with his touch. A touch not just like in other cases where he says words, but here with actual physical contact. Sometimes words are not enough.

Jesus gave this power to his disciples. At the conclusion of the *Gospel of Mark*, Jesus proclaims the signs of the members of his people. Among these signs is this one: they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.

We possess the wonderful capacity to be instruments of the healing power of Christ. Therefore, we have the duty not only to pray for the sick and to help them get

effective medical help, but also to pray over them and extend the touch of Christ to them. In the second reading for today Paul challenges us to imitate Christ. We are to be ministers of healing. We are to touch not just the physically sick, but all those whose lives are hurting and need healing in any way possible.

“Sending the twelve apostles to preach the Gospel, Jesus ‘gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness’ (Mt 10:1). He promised that healings would accompany their preaching: ‘they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover’ (Mk 16:18). Following Christ’s example, the apostles also enjoined prayers for the afflicted: ‘Are any among you sick? they should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven’ (Jas 5:14-15). the church continues the Apostolic tradition: it celebrates the Anointing of the Sick for the healing of soul and body, and for the forgiveness of sins.”

The Anointing is not the only tradition of the church concerning healing. in 1 Cor 12:28, some in the church have the gift of healing. When our Lord spoke of the judgment, He also spoke of taking care of the least (Mt 25), and one of the forms of caring was mentioned: “i was ill and you cared for me.” Healing is the job of every Christian.

It is simply not Christian to ostracize anyone for any reason whatsoever. In the Christian society, even those with the most contagious diseases are cared for in a way that gives them dignity and love. As a matter of record. It was when there was a plague that lasted from 250 to 270, that in most cases was fatal but in other instances left people crippled, blind or deaf. Cyprian told his Christian brethren to turn their Christian charity to the pagans. Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria wrote, “Most of our brother-Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains ... the heathens behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their loved ones, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treating the unburied corpses as dirt.” Because of this love shown, many people converted to Christianity.

How about those who are spiritually sick? How about those who have left the Church, left Christianity? Are they to be cared for as those who are very sick? Absolutely. Those who have left Christian society are always welcomed back into the society when they seek to return. For example, even in the extremely rare cases of excommunication, such as when someone performs or assists in abortions, that person can always seek forgiveness and re-entry into the community.

And yet, many people throw children or relatives out of their lives. “You are no longer my son, my daughter,” a parent hisses. Is there ever a situation where there is no longer any possibility of healing, of mercy, of extending the hand of Christ to those who seek reconciliation? Not in Christianity. The Forgiving Father may not have been able to give his Prodigal Son the remainder of the farm. That belonged to the Elder Brother. But he was able to welcome the prodigal back into the family. The person who has hurt his or her spouse and children may not be able to resume his or her place in

the marriage, but that person still can receive the forgiveness, the healing he or she longs for. The convicted murderer may never be able to re-assume a place in free society, but he can be forgiven and given an opportunity to turn to God while incarcerated.

When we allow ourselves to be so overcome by hurt and hatred that we refuse to extend the healing hand of the Lord to others, we take upon ourselves the sickness of the other person. Hatred kills. When we allow hatred to be part of our lives, we commit spiritual suicide. We cannot allow hatred to destroy us. Even in the wake of Moslem terrorism, even faced with the reality that there are many people in the world who hate us and who want us dead simply because we are Americans, we cannot allow hatred to destroy our humanity. Yes, we have to take measures to protect ourselves from those who would destroy us. Still, we do not have the right to hate anyone or any people and at the same time call ourselves Christian.

The Gospels often note that Jesus was moved with pity for the people as he preached the Kingdom of God. When he faced the troubled, the abandoned, the sick, when stirred by the blind, when crossing paths with the widow of Nain, and today, when face to face with a leper, Jesus was moved not by disgust, not by antagonism, but by compassion. Having compassion and showing mercy are the Christian qualities of great minds and large hearts.

Today we are called to allow our hearts to be enlarged by Christianity