



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York**

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**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, February 12, 2006**  
*The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Choral Eucharist  
at 11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Robert H. Stafford

on  
II Kings 5:1-15 and  
Mark 1:40-45

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*A SERMON FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY*

*“And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him...” (Mk 1.40)*

In today's Gospel, Jesus touches the untouchable.

Like the prophet Elisha in this morning's first lesson, which recalls the healing of Naaman, the leper (II Kings 5.1-15), in the waters of the Jordan, Mark tells of Jesus, early in his Galilean ministry, also healing a leper. Leprosy, known in the modern world as *Hansen's Disease*, is understood by us as a medically treatable illness. Whereas, in the context of Biblical time, the leper is an individual cast in a dark, fearsome, and terminal light; which is to say, he is twice marked, sick, he is also spiritually unclean, sinful. Like the dead, he is an untouchable, because what is unclean is also contagious. His illness is, therefore, by all surrounding him, misperceived/misunderstood. He is one, like many sharing the plight of Hansen's disease before the diagnosis and medicines of recent time, shunned, isolated, damned. The leper's situation in life is also to be understood in a wider context, as a paradigm for all throughout the ages who find themselves suffering and judged, particularly, those marginalized or at the periphery of society, the expendable of this world, and those whose fate no one can mitigate, the hopeless, the forgotten. The leper, I am saying, is anyone who has been driven beyond the boundaries of the community to the desert/wilderness for refuge. The evangelist's account this morning of the miraculous healing emanating from our Lord's outstretched hand and touch concludes the opening chapter of his Gospel, a chapter begun with John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. Between the two stories is a series of healings and the calling of men to discipleship, all actions or manifestations that lead to the conclusion of the chapter with the cleansing of the leper in today's Gospel. The placement of the stories in the first chapter, I think, is significant, as Christ's baptism is also the foundation on which the subsequent accounts rest, especially the Gospel appointed for this morning. Thus the baptism of Christ is a key to a greater understanding and purpose. And, it would, in my estimation, be an oversimplification to explicate the healing of the leper of today's Gospel apart from Jesus' baptism, as the two stories are of a unified construction by the Evangelist, resulting, I think, in a very sophisticated theological framework, one I wish to elucidate with you this morning. So, let us begin by going back, back to Christ's baptism in the Jordan.

The baptism of Jesus is essential to Mark's first chapter, because Christ's surrender to John in the waters of the Jordan, an event which recalls the Exodus and the salvation of

God's People, is not a singular event. Jesus is, by the very nature of his Incarnation, Son of Man and Son of God; a unique, double natured identity, which is to say all humanity, all time, and all creation, both the visible and invisible order, *and* all that is the mystery of that which is holy, divine. Therefore, the believer must see Christ taking the entirety of existence, history and time, the secular and the sacred, all into the Jordan water with him, in a symbolic death and resurrection, bringing an end to the old and fallen creation of Adam's sin and bringing into being the birth of the long awaited kingdom of heaven by the messianic one. In this mystery central to our faith as catholic Christians, Christ has, by his baptism, which is also a new Exodus, transfigured or changed the nature, map, identity, and blueprint of all that ever has been, is, and will be. While the external nature of people, places, things, and events remains deceptively the same, the Christian must now see differently, beyond the literal surface of things. The inner nature/identity of reality is now sanctified, made holy, like the bread and wine, for example, in Our Lord's hands at the Last Supper, become for us, by faith in the Grace of God, the body and blood of Christ. God, I am saying, is revealed for us at Christ's baptism as both transcendent and immanent, beyond all comprehension and at the same time now hidden or present in all, for there is no person, place, thing, or event where God cannot be. No longer removed and confined to heaven, the divine is now mixed into ordinary life, resulting in a radical overturning of the ultimate course of human history and a redefinition of the basic tenets of human identity and relationship, the image and pattern of Christ now imprinted upon the human soul and destiny. But, with God's omni-presence is also God's judgment over all, a judgment we hear announced at the Baptism of Jesus. And, that judgment is love/compassion/mercy. The action of this love equates holiness with justice, and this pursuit, the fulfillment of wholeness by God for His People, is the theme of the subsequent stories of Mark's first chapter. This is also what today's Gospel refers to as *God's touch*; which is to say, forgiveness, hope, and unity. This is the revelation and saving action of the Kingdom of Love, now come down from heaven, and forever and at once both transcendent and immanent, the healing mystery or truth at the heart of the miracles of Christ's touch in the Gospels. And when healing happens, whether in actual touch with outstretched hand, or with spit mixed with dust pressed to the eye of the blind, or with our Lord's finger unstopping the ear of the deaf, or through command and Word alone, we are witness to Christ's subversion of the kingdom and principalities of this world, a world under the control of fear, violence, and death, a world now and for all time delivered unto salvation, much like the Israelites transfigured by God in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land in the Exodus account. In the miracles like that of this morning, we are invited or called to believe, as what emerges before our eyes and understanding is something radically new, a kingdom of surpassing power and vivacity, a kingdom of everlasting/transformed life, what Scripture refers to as the Kingdom of Heaven/God. In a nutshell, this is the hope, the joy, and the promise of our faith, that the love of God is judgment unto everlasting salvation for all who come to Him and receive His touch. And, this is also the foundation on which the first chapter of Mark's Gospel is built, the proclamation of Good News that the apocalyptic age is upon us. The Kingdom of Heaven is here! God's touch is resurrected life!

But, baptism by itself, like resurrected life without action, is of no value. And, that is where today's account completes the theological intent of the Evangelist. The leper this morning, about whose character we know nothing, comes to Jesus solely because he has faith, "...saying unto him, 'If thou wilt, [Jesus], thou canst make me clean/'" (1.40). In his Gospel construction of the first chapter, Mark, therefore, ultimately links baptism with resurrected life and with faith. The aforementioned actions are inseparable, different avenues to one Grace, eternal life. Baptism, the Evangelist has told us, is God's saving action in history. Resurrected life, Mark has said, is the gift of the Holy Spirit come down at baptism, and faith is, as this morning's Gospel shows us, how we approach God, the need or willingness whereby we receive something we could not win for ourselves. The point I want to make this morning is simply that God can turn no one away who comes to Him in faith. This is because God is obedient unto His own holiness, merciful to those who are

faithful. God I am saying, is just to any one, be they righteous or outcast, who seek His touch in their life, a touch that casts out fear, violence, and death, a touch that empowers people to live as never before, a touch that resurrects. Thus, the Evangelist, I think, is asking us to identify with the desire or need that the leper of this morning has for God's touch in his life. The leper needs justice, needs hope. And, it is understood that justice and hope are something each and all in creation need. This touch, which calls us out of the wilderness of our longing for God is contrasted to how we are touched by time and mortality in the kingdom of this world, a world in which each and all are in some way, great or small, disfigured by fear, violence, and death. This is the touch of the kingdom of men, a touch that often pits the strong against the weak, the haves' against the have-nots', rich against poor, those of one color or nationality or identity against those of another – for that is how captives live in a world of rivalry, a world that scape-goats, which is to say, seeks to make someone suffer more than we do and against whom we can define ourselves in smug self-satisfaction, much like what was done to Christ upon the cross at Gospel's end. The touch of this world, I am saying, is disfiguration. But, also in the account of the leper, we are meant to see something more, that the response of the baptized, of each and all of us here today, is to faithfully do in our world amongst the people, places, things, and events of daily life as Christ does, to touch the unloved and untouchable in such a merciful way that they are made whole, made one, given hope and new life as they are brought into the community of the redeemed. This is the transfiguring touch of God, and this is the hard work of the Gospel, the bounden duty and service of the baptized. This is also the vision that we, the community of believers, need always to keep before us, because if we look deeply into ourselves, we discover we are both afflicter and afflicted, wounded and healed, men and women disfigured by this world and children of the Heavenly Father transfigured by holiness. And this disparity is a conflict that only God's grace knows how to bridge.

An example of today's Gospel comes to mind, an example of how we sometimes fail to live as Christ would have us live, an example of falling short and impoverished religious vision that must bring us to some sense of repentance or need for change. A middle aged professional man came with a friend last year to the late service here on Christmas Eve. He was born a Jew. His friend is Roman Catholic. They intended to stay only for the music preceding the mass. The man reported to me that he heard our rector invite all baptized Christians to receive communion, followed by the qualification that "...if you are not baptized and would like to be, then please speak to one of clergy after the service!" "It was at that invitation" [the man said] "...that I knew what I had to do." In other words, he had been touched by God. In early January, I received a call from this same man, who told me that he had gone to the Episcopal parish in the town where he lives, the town where he has also a professional practice. He said to the rector that he wanted to be baptized and join the congregation. He was shocked to be turned away, because the rector deemed his lifestyle *unsuitable for a Christian*. In other words, he had been awarded leper or outcast status and turned away, turned to the wilderness [so much for "the Episcopal Church Welcomes You"]. When the man subsequently contacted me and explained the personal details of his lifestyle, I told him I was aghast at what had happened and did not share any bias or judgment against him. I said that my understanding about baptism was that "desire" was the only prerequisite for the sacrament, as desire and willingness are the substance of faith to move us to respond initially to God's invitation/touch. In mid January, I met with the man and spoke at length with him. He was remarkably free of resentment or bitterness over what had occurred in the parish in his home town, although he said he had never encountered such blatant discrimination in his life. He was still stayed on his original intent, stirred to seek baptism in Jordan's life-giving water. He was, happy to say, baptized here in this parish a short time ago, his friend presenting him at the font where he made his vows. He has gratefully given me permission to tell you this story, which I recall to you because it illustrates the problem that can and often result from playing God in the lives of others, a power trip and delusion that have nothing to do with God at all but only idolatry and pride, misunderstanding and misperception that inflict a withering touch, the familiar touch of the judgment of the

kingdom of this world. This is the touch of fear, violence, and death, a touch in this life that is often camouflaged and disguised in righteousness, calling into being an impoverished and contorted world of strained mercy, where the letter of the law, with all its *jots and tittles*, becomes a neurotic and rigid literalism of gated communities of mind and spirit, of insider and outcast. This willfulness and meanness of spirit that we both give and receive throughout the course of a lifetime, recall those familiar words from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, where Portia speaks towards play's end (Act IV, ln 184 ff) to the assembled citizenry of Venice scandalized and powerless to prevent the heart of Antonio being cut from his chest in order to fulfill the contract of a pound of flesh due to recompense an unmet debt. "The quality of mercy is not strained [says noble Portia], ...It blesseth him that gives and him that takes." Applied to today's Gospel, her words remind me that we cannot play God without being as radically and wildly merciful as God is, as God in the baptism of Christ, for example, has revealed Himself to be, as Christ shows the gracious generosity of God to be in the healing of the leper in today's Gospel. I am saying we come to understand the mercy of God only as we struggle to be merciful with one another, especially with those who do not commend themselves to our mercy! And, this is a very Jewish way of thinking. God's mercy, we discover, is as Portia states, a contradiction and paradox that blesses him that gives and him that takes, a reminder, too, that if we accept God's mercy, we have to be willing to be merciful to those in our debt, even to our enemies in whom God also lives. And, that is what Christ is doing to the leper of today's Gospel. He is making the wilderness of the exiled and disfigured, a garden, a Promised Land and hope to all who come to Him in faith. Christ, we discover, is following the new commandment to be revealed more fully later in his passion, death, and resurrection, the commandment that is the cornerstone of the kingdom of heaven, that we *love one another as God loves us*, an impossible love, and a love which is also contagious!

What Mark, therefore, in his first chapter is giving us is God as a new language of paradox and surprise, a new reality of eternal and boundless mercy that summon us to live as never before in the new light of the epiphany of redemption come amongst us. This manifestation is the Holy God who is love, justice, and wholeness. What is hard for us, I think, is that we currently live in a world not of irreligion but of excessive religiosity. A world much like the Jerusalem of the Gospels, where a religious literalism is alive and well that may talk of love but promotes a pantheon of private rules and castes of fundamentalism and irrationality. And, this literalism seems to be found today in all the major religious traditions. For example, last month, I was met at the door by two agitated visitors to the church clutching Bibles to their chests saying, "I was not Biblically literal" in my preaching. I could only say that I was not, but I also thought to myself of Irenaeus, the second century bishop of Lyons and Church Father, who saw heretics as believers who reject paradox for false clarity and precision. We all have a touch of the heretic in us, the withered clarity and delusion of love without the paradox of mercy and forgiveness, the heresy of the Pharisee and Sadducee. We, also, each know that barren and desert land in which hearts ache in lonely isolation and cruel judgment in the face of religious bigotry and bias, the place of the leper in this morning's Gospel, the place of the man who went to his rector seeking baptism but was turned away, that place of the untouchable or outcast. But, the importance of what I am saying today is the importance of the Gospel, that God comes not only to comfort but to disturb us, to ruffle our feathers, as it were, to lead us with the touch of His Holy Spirit to awaken us to live differently, differently than the way the kingdom of this world lives. He comes to gather us together. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the God of Jesus Christ – is a living God, a God who continues to reveal Himself in shared experience and relationship with all that is. God is the central mystery and activity of our lives, our deepest identity. Where love is: God is. Where mercy is: God dwells. Where faith is: God is revealed. And those people, places, things, and events of God's being, dwelling, and revelation can be very strange indeed. Yet, here is also the time and place of the miraculous touch of God, more to be desired than gold, more to be desired than the kingdom, power, and glory of this world, for here in love, mercy, and faithfulness to our Lord's life and

command, is found the kingdom of Heaven, our belonging not only to God but to one another, improbable as that might seem! May God grace us – each of us – with His touch of transfigured life, and in so doing, may we be resurrected from fear, violence, and death!

In summary, I have said three things this morning. 1) Christ has come to transform creation, to make of something old something new, to make of the kingdom of men the kingdom of God. 2) To our powerlessness and life's unmanageability, God gives us the mystery of His love, so that we shall not ultimately be overcome by fear, violence, and death. And, 3) As Christ has given himself for us, we act in faith and mercy to give ourselves to the people, places, things, and events of this world. Christ's life is our life!

I conclude with three actions mindful of today's Gospel. 1) The leper of this morning recognizes and admits he needs help. He can't make it make it through life solely by himself. He reaches out. Reaching out, is, I think, a paradigm for prayer, our turning to God for help, our letting God be God. Pray, therefore. 2) What should we pray for? Once we turn to God, we cannot dictate terms or conditions to God, therefore we pray only for knowledge of God's will and the power to carry that out. Become, therefore, willing to act, even if it means acting as if you believed. Belief will come. 3) Religious life and discipline are about change. And, change is difficult. Growth is hard. And, in a world in which all things are passing away, we are wise to have priority as to what or to whom we cling. In the Gospels, we are given a hint and clue. It is God who clings to us, God, who holds us fast in those ancient Jordan waters of a new and everlasting covenant. It is God's mercy that will endure, will see us through, will bring us to eternal life. So, a final reminder, let us be of mercy most sure!