



## Touching the untouchable

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne March 15, 2009

### Call to worship from Psalm 73

*No doubt about it! God is good—good to the good-hearted. But I nearly missed it, missed seeing his goodness. I was looking the other way, looking up to the wrong people ... and when I tried to figure it out, all I got was a splitting headache ... Until I entered the sanctuary of God. Then I saw the whole picture: I was totally ignorant, a dumb ox in your very presence. Well, I'm still in your presence, but you've taken my hand. You wisely and tenderly lead me, and then you bless me. Yes, I'm in the very presence of God—oh, how refreshing it is! I've made Lord God my home. (The Message)*

### Here with me

*music recorded by mercyme*

I long for your embrace every single day  
To meet you in this place and see you face to face  
Will you show me, reveal yourself to me  
Because of your mercy, I fall down on my knees  
And I can feel your presence here with me  
Suddenly I'm lost in your beauty  
Caught up in the wonder of your touch  
Here in this moment I surrender to your love  
You're everywhere I go, I am not alone  
You call me as your own to know you and be known  
You are holy ... and I fall down on my knees  
And I can feel your presence here with me  
Suddenly I'm lost in your beauty  
Caught up in the wonder of your touch  
Here in this moment I surrender to your love

### Confession of sins and prayers

**Introduction to the message:** Christ Followers depend on God for forgiveness, because there is no way to earn God's love. No matter how good you have tried to be you'll never really know for sure if you've done enough to make God love you. Maybe you should have done another good deed, or let another car in front of you or given more money away. You just can't know for sure. Oh, sure, you can just not sweat it now, and hope the fires of Hell are all make believe and hope you won't be sweating it out for eternity if you miss the cut off for being good enough. Only that whole system of trying to be

good enough has nothing to do with God. God forgives people who don't deserve it. You know, people like me. And he has promised to help people who can't help themselves. As we said last week, "God's power is made clear in our moments of weakness." What would you expect from the whole story of Jesus, a man who was born in poverty, whose mother was a young unwed teen mother. And Mary never claimed she had been chosen for this role because she was so good ... but only because God was good to her. Indeed, her prayer to God reminds us now 2000 years later that God sees us all, he reaches out to those who feel far from him, and he lifts up those who have not made it to the top of the ladder on their own. No, there is no person, no single person alive that is too small or unimportant for God, or too far away to receive his forgiveness and his love.

### Magnificat

My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.  
For he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden,  
For behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.  
For he who is mighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
And his mercy is on those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm:  
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.  
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
And exalted those of low degree.  
He has filled the hungry with good things;  
And the rich he has sent empty away.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy;  
As he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his posterity forever.

### Reading: Matthew 8:1-3

*Jesus came down the mountain with the cheers of the crowd still ringing in his ears. Then a leper appeared and went to his knees before Jesus, praying, "Master, if you want to, you can heal my body." Jesus reached out and touched him, saying, "I want to. Be clean." Then and there, all signs of the leprosy were gone. (The Message)*

**Introduction to the message:** As we work through the miracles of Jesus leading up to Easter I am laying the groundwork for you to understand better the great miracle of Easter, and what waits for those who believe after Easter Day. So far I've explained that:

(1) Jesus did not entertain or do party tricks. The miracles were all teaching moments. And instead of using a miracle to gather a crowd and get people's attention, he usually performed miracles either quietly, or after he had taught. In this way miracles are more like punctuation marks on his teaching.

(2) Or as one commentator explains, you can think of miracles as acted out parables. They are dramatic, they are easy to remember. They make plain something that is hard to explain. And even though it is hard to understand how miracles happen. I have to wonder if that's just so smart modern people can't explain them away all too easily.

(3) We've seen how miracles transform people inside and out ... and how they show God's power, but all too often, they do it at a time of weakness. That way no one can take credit for the miracle other than God.

(4) And finally I said that miracles are not wasted on things that are small. Miracles are not wishes that come true, they are miraculous ways in which God enters into a situation and keeps things on track with his purposes.

Those are good things to remember as we start today on two weeks of looking at miracles of healing. Two weeks is not enough time to talk about healing so we'll do a whole series later in the year about healing and wholeness. For now, though, I want you to see some of the different layers of healing. Sometimes Jesus heals a person's body, sometimes he heals their mind, or their emotions. Sometimes Jesus sets people free from things that have them trapped. The Bible may use the term for this demons, and modern scientific folk don't like the word much. Unless you've been an alcoholic or an addict and you know how much that addiction felt like a demon inside of you. And then there are times when Jesus heals people by forgiving them ... not as if they were sick because they had sinned. If sinning always meant being sick, we'd all be in for some rough times. But often to teach a point, to show that he had power to forgive sins, he would heal a person of their sickness. Because which is easier, Jesus would ask, to say "*Your sins are forgiven*" or to say "*You are healed*" and have someone actually see or walk or jump for joy in front of everyone else? And sometimes Jesus healed merely to teach how God loves each broken and needy person:

### **Reading: Matthew 12:9-14**

*Jesus went over to the synagogue where he noticed a man with a deformed hand. The Pharisees asked Jesus, "Is it legal to work by healing on the Sabbath day?" (They were, of course, hoping he would say yes, so they could bring charges against him.) And Jesus answered, "If you had one sheep, and it fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn't you get to work and pull it out? Of course you would. And how much more valuable is a*

*person than a sheep! Yes, it is right to do good on the Sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Reach out your hand." The man reached out his hand, and it became normal, just like the other one. Then the Pharisees called a meeting and discussed plans for killing Jesus. (NLT)*

**Message:** Jesus walks into the meeting place, and at the same time he walks into a carefully designed trap. The Pharisees have set this up for him to test what Jesus will do. The placed a guy with a withered hand in the front row of the synagogue where Jesus will teach. We're not told how, but I can see them doing it in a sneaky way, "*Oh please Zedekiah, you are old and do not hear well. Please be our honored guest and take the front seat so you can hear Jesus so very well. And don't be ashamed to raise your hand to ask a question. I'm sure Jesus will want you to do that ...*" To the Pharisees, out to get Jesus for breaking the law by healing on the day of rest, this man with his withered hand and his life or challenges, meant nothing to them. They didn't care about him. They used him to get at Jesus. What would Jesus do?

He does what he always does. He showed that he cares about each broken, hurting person and he cares less about breaking any of the petty religious rules. Jesus looks at the man, loves him, reaches out to him, and heals him. Next Sunday we'll talk about the miracle of physical healing and whether such miracles could happen and if they can still happen today. But today notice there's something even more miraculous happening here. Jesus reaches out to this one crippled man, and he treats him as an honored, beloved friend.

All the usual things apply in this miracle. Jesus heals the man after teaching the people about mercy, so the healing is a way to punctuate his teaching. He does something important here. He doesn't make a wish come true, he makes a man whole. In so doing, Jesus teaches us something we can add to the list about miracles. No one is too small or too far off or too unimportant to receive God's touch. In Christianity, there are simply no "untouchables."

That's good news for us to hear, my friends, because to be an outcast, or to feel like one, is really harsh. Remember being left off the invitation list for a special party, knowing you were not wanted? What about being picked last for a team? To this day do you go to eat lunch and know you're not really welcome to eat with the others who are there ... or you talk to someone at a meeting, and the other person is saying, "*Uh huh,*" and "*Oh yeah,*" but all the while you see them looking around the room for the other people they need to go talk with. You realize you're just not very important. At least not to that other person. What if that other person is your teenager and you get the feeling they just don't want you around much anymore. Or what if it is your parent, and you've been told in subtle ways not to visit, not to call. I know for a fact each of these situations is something people in this room have faced. And maybe, somewhere in the back of your mind, you may have the idea that God feels the same way. God will treat you the same way ...

Each of us wants to know someone out there knows you and

cares about you. You want to know that if you were gone for a few days, someone would notice. Maybe they would call and ask how you're doing. That's one of the benefits to being in a small group here at Church. It's where you can be known and know others, and not be invisible. Because no one wants to feel invisible, right? Of course some folk just have more of a sense of confidence that they matter and won't be overlooked ... like Rick. He was a wealthy businessman and a member of the leadership team at his church. Out on vacation in the Keys he was fishing with a buddy when a storm came up and they were blown off course and shipwrecked on a small unnamed Key. Rick's friend Marty was beside himself with worry. They had little protection, little water, no food. Would anyone notice they were missing, would they come looking for them before it was too late. In a moment of stress he turned on his friend Rick and said, "Why aren't you more worried about all of this?" Rick smiled and said, "Oh I've got an insurance policy." Marty asked, "How's that gonna help us?" Rick said, "No you don't understand. I pledged \$400,000 to my church this year. If I'm missing for even one Sunday the pastor himself will swim out here looking for me."

Jesus works a miracle. He heals the man with the withered hand. But the real miracle here is that Jesus sees the man as an individual. To Jesus, the man was not some guy with a withered hand. He was a guy with a name. A guy with challenges, a guy with a future, a guy who could have eternal life if he only trusted in God. You know, when Jesus looks at you he doesn't see you as anything other than ... well, you. He doesn't see you as a parent or an engineer, as a student, a secretary or a sinner. He just sees you as you. He calls you by name. In the same way Jesus never met a prostitute, a tax collector or a Pharisee. He never met either a sinner or a saint. He met people, right where they are, and just as they are. He promises to do the same for you. Isn't that an amazing thing? Isn't that really the miracle of God's love ... that God can cut through everything else in all of creation and meet each individual one on one.

OK, so I'm not a leper. I don't have a withered hand. But I do have my own issues. I don't always understand everything clearly. I don't have an inside line to God. I do have a need to be healed. My arthritis has been acting up again. But what I need most of all, is in the midst of it all, to know God knows me and loves me. I need to know that I am not invisible to God. Then I can endure almost anything, knowing God is beside me every step of the way. His love changes me, just knowing he knows me changes everything.

I've told this story before, years back. It bears repeating. It's from Elizabeth Sherrill, author and editor of *Guideposts* magazine, and a personal friend from another church years ago. She writes:

I hadn't seen David and Marilyn since they'd retired and moved to Arizona, but through Christmas cards I'd followed their ups and downs. For the past four years, since David was diagnosed as having Alzheimer's disease, I gathered that things had been pretty arm. When I went to visit them in Phoenix, Marilyn warned me, "He

won't know you. He doesn't know the children anymore." It was true. There was no recognition in David's eyes as I gripped the passive hand on the arm of the wheelchair. But he was obviously well cared-for in this clean, cheery home. It was Marilyn I was concerned about. Nothing in her Christmas cards had communicated the strain on her ... "This is Tibi, dear," she said for the fifth or sixth time. "Remember, we used to be neighbors?" There was no response. "Who's this?" She lifted a framed photograph of their daughter from the dresser. David stared at it, then shook his head. It was the same with the pictures of their son, their grandchildren, their old collie. Then Marilyn lifted his hands from the wheel chair arms, held them in both of hers and leaned close. "Who am I dear? she asked. David had the same gentle and bemused smile. But his face brightened a little. For just a moment he looked different. "You're the one who loves me," he said. Those were the only words he spoke during my visit. On the plane ride home I wondered, "But what else do we need to know? About one another. Or about God."

from "When God breaks through" by John and Elizabeth Sherrill

What else indeed. God has shown us through these miracles with lepers and outcasts that we will never be invisible to him. And that's amazing. I mean, who am I that God should care about me? Who am I? That's a tough question to answer. But then I remember, it's not about me ... it's not because of who I am but because of who God is that he is willing to reach out across all eternity, across every mile of creation to touch me, and prove that with all my faults I am not an untouchable. I matter to him. That matters so much to me I can't tell you ... for you see, God has answered the question I have asked so many times before. When I ask, "Who am I?" God reminds me "I am his. I belong to Jesus." Not because of what I've done by because of what he has done ... in healing a leper, a man with a withered hand, and a man like me.

## Solo: Who am I?

words and music recorded by Casting Crowns

Who am I that the Lord of all the earth,  
Would care to know my name, would care to feel my hurt.  
Who am I that the bright and morning star,  
Would choose to light the way, for my ever wandering heart.  
Not because of who I am, but because of what you've done.  
Not because of what I've done, but because of who you are.  
I am a flower quickly fading, here today and gone tomorrow,  
A wave tossed in the ocean, a vapor in the wind.  
Still you hear me when I'm calling, Lord,  
you catch me when I'm falling,  
And you've told me who I am. I am yours. I am yours.  
Who am I that the eyes that see my sin  
Would look on me with love and watch me rise again.  
Who am I? that the voice that calmed the sea,  
Would call out through the rain, and calm the storm in me.  
Not because of who I am, but because of what you've done.  
Not because of what I've done, but because of who you are.  
I am yours. I am yours.