

We are going to try something a little different today... I know that we are long overdue to resume our series in the gospel of Luke.... but I want to share with you something that God has been working in me this past week... and I really feel compelled to share it with you... Think of this.. kind of like a story telling time... In fact, some of you might have noticed a slight change in my preaching the last couple months or so... I'm trying to incorporate what pastors call more of a NARRATIVE preaching flavour to the sermon...

And heres a quote that is meant to provide more meaning to this time... and help you pay attention.. to this STORY TELLING TIME... and also, this is going to encourage the parents in this room... to READ stories to their children...

Adam Swift, a distinguished political theorist and distinguished professor at the University of Warwick... said this as he was being interviewed last year by ABC Radio back in 2015... and I quote... "I don't think parents reading their children bedtime stories should constantly have in their minds the way that they are unfairly disadvantaging other people's children... but I think they should definitely at least kinda feel bad about it sometimes... WHY?

"The evidence shows that the difference between those who get bedtime stories and those who don't—the difference in their life chances—is bigger than the difference between those who get elite private schooling and those that don't." We're talking about YORKHOUSE, CROFTON HOUSE, LITTLE FLOWER ACADEMY...HUNDREDS of THOUSANDS of DOLLARS in tuition... WORLD-CLASS EDUCATION... AND that doesn't COMPARE TO THE POWER OF RAISING YOUR CHILDREN ON GOOD STORIES. I find that VERY comforting... as Christians.. WE HAVE access to the GREATEST story EVER TOLD... READ IT for your children... and you will be doing far more for them than the millionaires in West Vancouver...

You see... Stories.. they are a funny thing... they aren't as straight forward as commands or a set of rules... BUT in the long run... they are WAY more formative... That's why 2/3 of the Bible is NARRATIVE. God chose to reveal Himself to us THROUGH STORIES and He decided to SANCTIFY us THROUGH STORIES... THIS is why WE ALL cultures have their OWN STORIES... their own narratives... what makes a people group unique isn't

necessarily their own set of rules or skin colour ... BUT IT IS THEIR NARRATIVE... the stories that we GREW up with ARE EXTREMELY FORMATIVE in determining who we are NOW...

Before I share with you MY story... I want us to look briefly at a biblical story which will provide the context for the story I'm going to share later on.....

So if you have your Bibles with you.. would you turn with me to Luke 15:12-13... We are going to be looking again at the story of the Leper... That's Luke 15:12-13.

12 While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. So this man wasn't just a leper.. He was FULL OF leprosy. HE HAD A SEVERE case of leprosy...

And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." **13** And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him.

This is the story of a LEPER who met our Lord Jesus Christ... Luke - the physician... tells us that this man was FULL of leprosy... Which means... this LE PER... would LITERALLY have resembled the zombies that we see on screen...

Something you might find interesting is that the whole concept of zombies has its ROOTS in leprosy ... how they walk.. the texture and colour of the skin... the bloodshot eyes...

And much like the zombies we see on screen.. lepers were treated in a shockingly similar manner.

Josephus, the famous Jewish historian, said that lepers were to be treated as dead men. And the rabbis of Jesus' day said that next to touching a dead body, being in close proximity with a leper was the worst form of defilement. Some even went as far as to condone throwing stones at lepers so that they wouldn't come near you - for fear of contracting the disease.

What ended up happening was that lepers were sent to these colonies on the very outskirts of civilization... and were forced to live there alone... with other lepers... And its not just the jews...

ALL around the world, lepers were and still are marginalized and dehumanized to the point where they are literally counted as dead men - for the most part of human history, they had NO legal rights and were treated worse than animals...

So this man - who has ACUTE leprosy - has it REALLY BAD. THIS is the story of a WRETCHED man who is LOVED by NO ONE... who is SO DESPERATE...who knows full well the very real risk of being stoned to death for breaking the quarantine laws, YET such is his desperation that HE GOES INTO THE CITY... FINDS Jesus and falls on his face...

JESUS... HELP ME... I am BLEEDING ALL OVER AND MY SKIN IS ROTTING...I am UGLY... No one loves me... everyone treats me like a dead man. SAVE ME LORD!

verse. 13... And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him.

I want to zoom in here in verse 13. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him.

What is SO MIND BLOWING here ISN’T that fact that the man was healed INSTANTLY! THAT’S a piece of cake for God who SPOKE the entire universe into existence... Don’t get caught up in that detail... RATHER... notice with me something that truly is AMAZING!

We see here that Jesus chooses to touch the leper. Jesus TOUCHES HIM! He could have just said, “BE CLEAN”. But instead... he touches him. When Jesus saw the leper... he didn’t cringe back in disgust... like so many of us do... He didn’t cringe away in disgust at the blood...at the open sores... or at the smell of rotting flesh...

OUR KING IS REACHING out his hand to touch a leper... SO who ARE WE to cringe back in DISGUST??? In fact, the word here is much stronger than just a touch. The Greek could literally be translated, TAKE hold of. So that picture... although its nice to look at... is misleading... Jesus most likely didn't heal by just touching the man like this... HE EMBRACED HIM. - I WANT TO BE LIKE THAT!!! I WANT TO EMBRACE DIRTY PEOPLE with the LOVE OF JESUS...

Maybe Jesus put his arm around his shoulders. and gave him a loving squeeze.

And whats so amazing about all this is - Jesus could have healed the man without touching him. He does it all the time! He can heal with just a word... IN FACT - there were times when Jesus healed from a great distance, without a word OR a touch. But Jesus knows that this leper needs love just as much as he needs healing...

So he reaches out... and takes hold of him... In order to show that He cares for him.. that He loves him! Jesus isn't above getting dirty... Jesus was not scared of his sores, or put off by his rotting flesh. The touch said, "I am here with you. I sympathize with you when no one else does. I understand. I love you."

HOW MANY YEARS ... how many years must it have been since someone last gave this man a loving touch.... how many years since the last hug... How many years had it been since someone had done something as simple as give his shoulder a loving squeeze?

Do you ever feel like a leper? There are times when we feel UNWANTED and UNACCEPTED... that no one understands and that no one cares to know us INTIMATELY... Jesus is saying the same thing to you right now... "I am here with you. When everyone else cringes back in disgust... I am here with you embracing you... I sympathize with you when no one else does. I understand. I love you."

But beyond this, I believe Jesus shows love to the leper for another reason. You see.. Jesus had just called his first disciples to follow him and told them that He would teach them how to become fishers of men.

This is their first fishing lesson. Jesus is telling them that if they want to catch men, they first need to love them. Jesus is showing his disciples how to become fishers of men; namely, reach out and touch someone. Look past the scars and the SORES and the rotting flesh, the missing fingers... and the bloodshot eyes... and just love them.

So that's the story of the Leper...

Here's my story...

This past week...

On Monday... our church went to Potter's Place... for our monthly ministry to the poorest of the poor... some of you were there.. and I preached a similar message on the identity and gospel that I did here 3 weeks ago. And my first point was how we are all immensely valuable because we are created the image of God.

Well after I finished. I was rather pleased with myself.... People came up to me and told me how the message had spoken to them... I prayed for different people... listened to their stories... I looked them in the eye.. and I genuinely was LOVING these people...these broken people that bear the divine image...

But near the end... in comes this lady... all shrivelled up. walking in ... IMMEDIATELY the ethos and ATMOSPHERE of the building changes.... Everyone becomes a bit more alert and a bit more wary... She is walking in literally like a zombie... and you could tell right away that she had been banged up so many times.. that her body had been abused so many times... that it had broken her both physically and mentally....

She had come for the bread that the Park family donate.. and we were helping her pack... and I turn away for a few seconds... only to find her grovelling and lamenting on the floor ... And from what I could discern... she was upset because her "ice cream" had melted... There was no ice cream in sight.

And I tried to console her... your ice cream didn't melt.. your bread is still in the bag... and I tried to help her up... ALL THE WHILE...trying to suppress this GROWING NOTION that GOD WANTED me TO REACH OUT TO HER AND EMBRACE HER.

But I couldn't. I just couldn't. Her body was covered in sores.. and she was salivating...

Meanwhile.. in the background... as all this is going on one of the volunteers who is not a believer... but who comes out overtime with me to Potters Place... he was saying things like throw the bad of food at on the streets and she will leave... People were treating her like an animal...

.Eventually, I managed to help her get back up... I gripped her by the arm... the one place on her body that was relatively clean... and led her out the door... BUT I COULD not bring myself to HUG her AND PRAY FOR HER...

And here I am thinking to myself. Ok. Joseph. Do you really believe what you said? EVERYONE is created in the image of God? And THEREFORE, are IMMENSELY VALUABLE... WHAT ABOUT THIS WOMAN? DOES SHE NOT BEAR THE DIVINE IMAGE? Does she not deserve to be treated with IMMENSE DIGNITY?

That night, I got back home at around 12.... But I couldn't fall asleep. because the image of this lady was BURNT into my mind.. Like it wouldn't leave me... so I began praying for her.. I repented of my own sin... and while I was doing that... REPENTING... it struck me...

That's me.... THAT'S ME!

I AM THE LEPER... I AM the woman that is so BROKEN that no one would care to get intimate with or marry....

You see... SIN is INFINITELY more abominable than any disease... The leperous... the insanity ... DISEASE... THEY ARE PARABLES of the UGLINESS of SIN...

That's ME! THAT's ME... And then I began weeping... Because it struck me... That's ME... AND GOD LOVES ME...! JESUS EMBRACES LEPERS... HE EMBRACES SINNERS.

Romans 5:8 - God shows HIS LOVE TOWARD ME in that WHILE I WAS STILL A SINNER, HE DIED FOR ME....

In what is perhaps the most graphic chapter in the Bible... Ezekiel 16... in fact its so graphic that throughout church history and Jewish history .. it was forbidden to be read in public... because of its R-rated nature... I'll just read you the less explicit bits.. Ezekiel 16... starting in verse 4...

THAT'S the story of OUR LIVES. Its not just the story the story of the leper... It isn't even the story of the LADY that was at Potters Place... Some of you were there... YOU SAW HER! SHE wasn't LOVABLE.. NO MAN WOULD SLEEP WITH HER/ NO MAN WOULD MARRY HER... BUT THATS US!!! THAT'S US! We were UGLY! WE were WALLOWING in our OWN BLOOD... LEPROSY and PHYSICAL DEFORMITY and INSANITY.. THIS IS ALL A PARABLE OF THE UGLINESS OF SIN,..... YET GOD LOVED US....

HE LOVED US WHILE WE WERE YET SINNERS... That isn't just a theological statement.. IT IS MORE REAL AND PROFOUND that we can ever now... At GREAT COST TO HIMSELF... God embraced us... and drew us close to Him.... How? By dying on the cross for OUR SINS... ON THE CROSS, he BORE OUR SIN... HE bore the WRATH of GOD AGAINST SIN... He bore the reproach and shame and disgust and ABANDONMENT THAT WAS OURS... and HE TOOK THAT ALL UPON HIMSELF.... on the cross...

That is the story of our lives. Leperous men.. broken women... that have been PURCHASED by God... We have been clothed... FED... LOVED... As Martyn Lloyd-Jones once famously said - Christians aren't good people that are pleasing to look at... They are VILE WRETCHED UGLY SINNERS that have been saved by the grace of God...

So what should our response be? How does STANDING BEFORE THAT KIND OF GRACE CHANGE the way I live life? And you better bet that it changes you... Its like being hit by a truck on the highway... THIS GRACE has MOMENTUM.. Its like a WATERFALL.. Once you are hit with the realization that you are an unlovable wretch that has been saved by grace... YOU WILL CHANGE... HOW?

Two points.. then I'm done.

First... knowing that GOD LOVES you while you were a LEPER should FILL you with such a sense of awe and gratitude and humility that you devote your LIFE COMPLETELY to Him. You begin to orient your ENTIRE LIFE and BEING around the one who showed you such amazing love...

Second. You must not turn a blind eye to the outcasts in our lives... It is not enough just to watch from a distance.. with pity and COMPASSION.. THATS NOT ENOUGH... WE MUST LOVE THEM... WE MUST APPROACH THEM WITH LOVE. God doesn't just call us to have pity on the lepers in our lives... THAT EASY TO DO THE WORLD HAS COMPASSION on LEPERS... CHRISTIANS LOVE LEPERS... because GOD LOVES lepers... We all have people in our lives that need a loving touch... Next time you see them... don't cringe back i disgust at their SCARS... don't just keep a safe distance and pray fro them from afar and pity them... GO UP TO THEM... and CONVERSE with them... give them a encouraging pat on the back... and build a relationship with them... This is the first fishing lesson that Jesus taught His disciples. In the same way... in order for us to be fishers or men... we too must pass this lesson,, if we are to be disciple makers...

Lets pray.