

Epiphany 6B, 2009

Text: Mark 1:40-45

Title: Jesus Has Compassion

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Anniversaries begin by looking back. It's hard to know where you're going if you don't know where you've been.

This church building has stood for over fifty years now. For some of us, that's a long time. Fifty years ago, my parents hadn't even met. In fact, fifty years ago my dad was a freshman in high school. And yet some of you have been married for over fifty years. Some of you can remember the joy and the excitement of the day when this building was dedicated on March 9, 1958.

The point of this is not to make you feel old, but begin our look back at how the Lord has blessed us over the years.

When we look back, our temptation is to focus on ourselves and what we have done- the sacrifices that we have made in building this place and what we have done to serve the Lord here for past generations.

But that would be to make us just like any other organization or charity. This year the city of Oak Lawn is celebrating 100 years. How is our celebration different? What makes our anniversary special and unique?

This anniversary begins with the Lord and what He has done. It's not about us and what a spectacular job we've done. If it was, then we'd have little to celebrate. We often fail and fall short. We don't give back to the Lord like we should. We are self-centered and focus on ourselves and our needs rather than the needs of others.

The best place to start is with the Lord, and what He's done. What has the Lord been up to in this place for the past 50 years?

"Compassion" is the word from our gospel lesson that describes who Jesus is and what He's all about. The Lord has compassion on the man with leprosy.

The word used for "compassion" is a very specific term. The verb is *σπλαγχνίζομαι*, which comes from the noun *σπλαγχνά*. Your *σπλαγχνά* are your guts, the organs deep inside you. Have you even seen something so sad, so horrific, so absolutely tragic, that it's literally gut-wrenching, that you actually feel pain deep inside of you, that it makes you sick that such a thing could happen? It's the feeling you get when see a child dying from cancer, when you talk to someone who's been raped or abused, when you see innocent victims of war, this is the feeling that you get.

That is what happens here. Jesus sees the man with leprosy, and it's like a sledgehammer to His gut. With leprosy your body rots away, leading to horrible disfigurement. It's hard to look someone in the eye when their body has been so mangled and tortured by disease.

This disease took a toll on you both physically and emotionally. You were shunned. You could not live at home with your family and friends, but lived outside of town, on the margins of society. This man doesn't even have a name. He is not introduced as anyone's son or father. He is only known by his disease.

This is not how we were meant to be. We were not created to rot and waste away. We were not created to live in fractured communities, separated from our friends and family.

When Jesus sees this man He knows the pain and struggle of His life, and He feels that pain. That is what the English word, "compassion" means, to suffer with someone.

When Jesus sees someone hurting or in pain, He doesn't just watch from a distance. Jesus doesn't just feel sorry for someone and move on. No, Jesus gets involved. Jesus gets His hands dirty.

Jesus reaches out and touches the man with leprosy. The man whom no one else would touch, the man who had to warn people to stay away from him. This is the man who has not had a handshake or a hug for years, and Jesus actually touches Him.

If you touched a leper you would be made unclean. It was risky. You risked your own life to get involved with someone who had leprosy.

But when Jesus touches the leper, something amazing happens. Instead of the leper making Jesus unclean, Jesus makes the leper clean. It wasn't supposed to work that way. If you are healthy and you touch someone who is sick, what happens? Chances are their sickness will infect you, your healthiness doesn't get them better.

But Jesus is different. His life flows from His touch and His words. When Jesus touches you, He gives you his life and takes your sickness upon Himself. He takes all of the sickness of the world upon Himself, and bears it all the way to the cross.

The leper's story is our story, too. It is a story that has been played out right here in this place for the past fifty years. This is the place where Jesus continues to have compassion on people who are suffering.

We all come here week after week suffering in both body and soul. We are rotting away from the inside. Some of us hide it better than others, but we are all afflicted by our sin, and we see its effects in all the pains of our life.

Sin is the reason why everything is falling apart around us. Sin is the reason why our marriages fail and our families fall apart. Sin is the reason why sickness and pain have entered our world.

Jesus sees us in all of our pain and our suffering. He knows that this is not how we were created to live. Jesus is struck to the core, and Jesus has compassion on us. Jesus does not stand off at a distance and feel sorry for us, but Jesus gets involved, gets His hands dirty.

Jesus took all of our sinfulness and sickness onto Himself and died for them on the cross. And right here in this place is where the fruits of the cross are given out. This is where Jesus has compassion on you, touches you and gives you His life.

For fifty years, Jesus' words have touched the ears of people in this place. The pastors have changed, the congregation has changed, but Jesus' compassionate gospel remains the same. He sees us in our sorry state, He has mercy on us, and He speaks His healing word to us.

He touches us physically in the Lord's Supper as we receive His body and blood. Jesus' body joins us to His body, the church. We are no longer outside, isolated, living on our own, but part of a family, part of a community. Jesus' blood cleanses us from all of our sinfulness. His lifeblood flows into us and makes us clean and whole. Jesus' body and blood prepares our bodies for resurrection. Jesus' body has risen from the dead, and so when we receive that same body, we know that we, too, will rise with Him.

That is what is worth celebrating this and every day. Jesus has compassion on us and touches us, making us clean and giving us life.

That is what makes this place different from the city hall or the library or the senior center or the VFW hall. Sure, the Lord can use those places, too. But this place is set apart as the Lord's place, where He has compassion on us from generation to generation. When you come here, you know that the Lord's word will be spoken and that you will receive the Lord's Body and Blood. The Lord will meet you here and touch you and make you clean.

And the Lord sends you out from this place to show compassion to those you meet in your life. They will be hurt and broken, just like you. And when you see them, your heart will break. They may be in such dire need that you are moved to tears.

The only thing that will bring them comfort and healing, the only thing that will make them clean and whole is Jesus' touch.

And so you tell them how the Lord has had compassion on you, and how He will have compassion on them. You bring them here to this place- your children, your grandchildren, your friends and neighbors, to meet with Jesus here and to feel His healing touch.

That is why it is so important for this congregation to continue to exist for generations to come. Even if your children have grown and moved away, even if all of your friends are active in this congregation or another, there will always be folks who are suffering or in pain.

Anniversaries begin by looking back. As we look back we see that Jesus has had compassion us in this place for the past 50 years.

Anniversaries begin by looking back. But they don't stop there. You can't drive if you never take your eyes off the rearview mirror.

So do come back next week as we continue not only looking back, but looking forward to see what the Lord is up to in this place now and in years to come.