

If You Are Willing...



Author Larry Davies, in his book *Sowing Seeds of Faith in a World Gone Bonkers*, tells a story with which many of us can identify. He says the check-out line at his local grocery store was long and he was in a hurry. Seeing another line nearby that was nearly empty, he walked over and stood behind the only customer still to make a purchase. A young woman was holding a small basket with fifteen to twenty jars of baby food. There was nothing else in the basket: just baby food. “This is great,” he thought. “She’ll only be a minute and I can be on my way.” The clerk took the woman’s check for seven dollars and forty-three cents and slid it in the proper slot on the register. At this point the cash drawer was supposed to open and a receipt printed, but no. A light began to blink: “See Manager.” The clerk called on the intercom for the manager while running the check through again on her register. The same sign kept flashing: “See Manager.” “Oh no!” thought Davies. Not another delay. When the manager arrived, however, he didn’t even look at the cash register, but instead picked up the check and began to talk to the customer. Davies could feel the muscles in his stomach tighten as the reality of what was happening struck him. The check for seven dollars and forty-three cents was no good and the manager was quietly saying she could not buy her baby food here. The clerk quickly set the groceries aside, closed the account and began to ring up Davies’ purchase. “She should manage her money better!” Davies tried to convince himself while leaving the store. “She’s probably an alcoholic or a drug addict.” But his flimsy excuses would not erase the picture in his mind of a grocery basket with jars of baby food. Davies writes, “At this point, I want to finish the story by writing how I approached the manager and offered to pay for the purchase of the baby food. It was the right thing to do I can afford seven dollars and forty-three cents. Instead, hiding my light under a bowl, I turned my head and walked away. There are no acceptable excuses. I had a great opportunity to help someone and I walked away.”

Can anyone relate to that story? Perhaps it was the sad-looking man who approached you at the fast food restaurant. “So many conmen out there nowadays,” we say to ourselves.

“He doesn’t really need money to get to his family back home. He’ll just buy booze.” Or maybe it was the guy on the corner holding up the sign “Will work for food.” Somebody ought to do something we think to ourselves defensively. “He shouldn’t be able to harass people like that.” Still, I wonder, how often do we turn away someone who really is in need?

Reading the stories of Jesus doesn’t help. Jesus never turned anyone away. In our story from the Gospel for today a man with leprosy came to Jesus for help. It is clear Jesus was already attracting attention by his healing miracles. This man evidently had heard the stories and believed them for he got down on his knees and begged Jesus, “*If you are willing, you can make me clean.*” Now that’s faith. *If you are willing . . .* said the man. He believed Jesus could heal him, if only Jesus would.

I think you know the terrible disease leprosy was in those days. It was literally a living death. Flesh died and decayed while still part of a living person leaving that person horribly disfigured but even worse than the disease was the treatment of the person with leprosy by society. Josephus declared that lepers were treated “as if they were, in effect, dead men.” Whenever leprosy was diagnosed on examination by the priest, the leper was banished from the community. The writer of Leviticus spelled out the sentence of the condemned: “He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease and he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp”. The leper had to go with “rent clothes, disheveled hair, and with a covering upon his upper lip,” and as he went he had to cry, “Unclean, unclean” Such was the situation of the desperate man who fell to his knees before Jesus. He did not doubt that Jesus could heal him. His only question: was Jesus WILLING to heal him.

You understand that, don’t you? You have no doubt that God can heal cancer . . . no doubt that God can heal addiction . . . no doubt that God can save your marriage. But is God willing? That is the real question that haunts us all... not are WE willing to do whatever it takes, rather is God willing. And the answer from this story is, “yes,” God is willing. *If you are willing*, the leper begged the Master, “you can make me clean.” And here is how Jesus responded to his request. Mark writes, “Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left [the man] and he was cured.” Why did he do it? You know why. “Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.”

That’s the problem with Jesus in many people’s estimation. He has too much compassion . . . he’s too soft-hearted . . . too easy to forgive . . . too easy to accept people’s shortcomings . . . too willing to do for people what they ought to do for themselves. Conveniently people who feel this way ignore the fact that if Christ were not compassionate, none of us would stand a chance of salvation. If he were not easy to forgive . . . if he were not willing to accept people’s shortcomings . . . if he were not willing to do for us what we ought to do for ourselves but cannot . . . all of us would be on

the outside looking in. And so we are stuck with a compassionate Christ. And what does that compassionate Christ expect out of you and me? He has given us a clear mandate: we are to be compassionate, too. The example Christ has set is to be followed by those who call themselves by his name. Christians have the power to make a difference in other people's lives because, like Jesus, we care.

Let me tell you a story about a lady named Veronica Goska. Goska has an illness that causes intermittent bouts of paralysis. Some days, she cannot move her limbs. Some days, her eyes shut down and she cannot see. But other days, she can walk, and she can see. When she can walk, she travels to school by foot along a railroad track. In the springtime, turtles often get stuck between the bars of the track. Many of them starve, dehydrate, or get squashed. But when Veronica walks along the tracks, she picks up every living turtle she finds, carries it to a wooded area, and releases it. "For those turtles," she says, "the little power I have is enough." "I'm just like those turtles," she goes on. "When I've been sick and housebound for days, I wish someone, anyone, would talk to me. To hear a human voice say my name, to be touched - that would mean the world to me. One day, an attack hit me while I was walking home from campus. It was a snowy day. I struggled with each step, wobbled and wove across the road. I must have looked like a drunk. One of my neighbors, whom I had never met, stopped and asked me if I was okay. He drove me home." "He did not hand me the thousands of dollars I needed for surgery. He did not take me into his own house, or clean up the mess in my house for me. He just gave me one ride, one day. I am still grateful to him and touched by his gesture. I have lived in the neighborhood for years, and so far he has been the only one to stop. The problem is not that we don't have enough power," says Veronica Goska. "The problem is that we don't use the power we have."

Have you ever thought of compassion as a source of power? It is. Every time we exercise our sense of compassion, we are making the world a better place for somebody. That's power. We can't touch the leper and make the leper clean. But we can touch the leper and give them hope for another day.

According to the late Charles Schultz, creator of the comic strip Peanuts, "The people who make a difference in your life are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money or the most awards. The ones that make a difference are the ones who care." *If you are willing*, the man with leprosy begged Jesus, "you can make me clean." Christ was willing to heal the man with leprosy, just as Christ is willing to heal us, whatever our need might be. We see here a compassionate Christ who reached out to the lowest member of society with love and healing. This is the same Christ who listens to our prayers and cleanses us and makes us whole.

Professor Henry Mitchell wrote about a time when his wife was recovering from a critical illness. He approached the doctor to thank him for his attentiveness and care for his wife Ella. The doctor's response amazed him. The doctor said, "First of all, give God the praise.

Then thank the people for their fervent prayers. Then maybe I come in somewhere on down the line.” Henry Mitchell thought this was unusual modesty, and maybe even undue modesty, to which the doctor replied that he was just being honest. “You see,” he said, “we doctors don’t ever heal anybody. We may be effective in removing obstacles to healing, such as infections, but the actual healing process is not ours to control.” As Mark Twain once said, “God heals, the doctor collects the fee.”

We do not understand the ways of God. But we know that God sees the whole picture while we see only a tiny fragment. As Paul writes in I Corinthians 13:12, “We see through a glass darkly.” But we know God loves us and cares for us. And God has the power to make a difference in our lives. Jesus was willing and able to heal this man. He is willing and able to heal us.

A pastor tells about how years ago he was conducting a funeral at a small church for an old family physician who had lived 102 years. A woman stood up in the middle of the service and, with tears making tracks down her face, said, “Whenever we heard his old Model T turning into our yard, we started to get better.”

My guess is that is how people felt when Jesus came into their community. We know how people’s expectations can affect their physical response. Here was a compassionate healer. He didn’t heal everyone in the community, but those who found themselves in his presence discovered that the stories about him were true; he did have power to heal. Sometimes he healed the body. Sometimes he healed the mind. But there is no doubt he possessed a greater power than could be found anywhere else.

I close with a story about Michael Wayne Hunter who was put on death row in 1983, in San Quentin Prison. After his third year on death row something happened. One day he was getting ready to spend time exercising when the guard said, "You're going to miss Mother Teresa. She's coming today to see you guys." Yea, sure, he said, "one more of those designs they have on us." A little later he heard more commotion and thought it might be true, Mother Teresa was actually coming to see them. Another guard said, "Don't go into your cells and lock up. Mother Teresa stayed to see you guys." So Michael jogged up to the front in gym shorts and a tattered basketball shirt with the arms ripped out, and on the other side of the security screen was this tiny woman who looked 100 years old... it was Mother Teresa. This hardened prisoner wrote about his experience, he said, "You have to understand that, basically, I'm a dead man. I don't have to observe any sort of social convention; and as a result, I can break all the rules, say what I want. But one look at this Nobel Prize winner, this woman so many people view as a living saint, and I was speechless." Michael said an incredible vitality and warmth came from her wizened, piercing eyes. She smiled at him, blessed a religious medal, and put it in his hands and all he could say was, "Thank you." Now listen to what happens: Preparing to leave Mother Teresa turned and pointed her hand at the guard, "What you do to these men," she told him, "you do to God." The guard almost faded away in surprise and wonder. He couldn't

believe Mother Teresa had said that to him.

That day was a turning point in the life of Michael Wayne Hunter. Suddenly there was meaning to it. Mr. Hunter became a model prisoner and an award-winning writer. He is one other thing: A testimony that Christ still is willing to heal, still willing to touch the untouchable, and to make us whole.

If you are willing I will show you a new way. Let those who have ears, hear! Amen.



Rev. Dr. Ellen Redcliffe
Mark 1:40-45
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