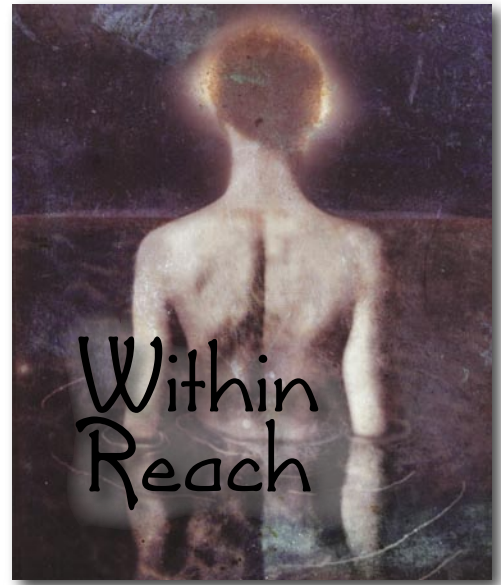


And a leper came to Jesus,
beseeching Him and falling
on his knees before Him,
and saying, "If You are
willing, You can make me
clean." Moved with compas-
sion, Jesus stretched out His
hand and touched him, and
said to him, "I am willing; be
cleansed." Immediately the
leprosy left him and he was
cleansed. And He sternly
warned him and immediately
sent him away, and He said
to him, "See that you say
nothing to anyone; but go,
show yourself to the priest
and offer for your cleansing
what Moses commanded, as
a testimony to them." But he
went out and began to pro-
claim it freely and to spread
the news around, to
such an
extent that
Jesus could
no longer
publicly enter
a city, but stayed out in
unpopulated areas; and they
were coming to Him from
everywhere.

(Mark 1:40-45)



NO ONE WOULD COME NEAR HIM. He could not approach anyone else. Most of his adult life had been spent outside the city, isolated from family, friends, all the rest of society. Even others of his own kind would not touch him—as he would surely not touch them. He was unclean, an outcast. He was a leper.

His illness marked him. It was impossible to convince anyone standing before him that he was anything but an incurably diseased man. The skin across most of his body was covered with sores, misshapen by the voracious pestilence devouring it. By Jewish law he could not live with the rest of society. By law, he would never again know the touch of a friend.

Endless days of self-pitying despair; one endless hour after another, the droning boredom of his alienation; anger and frustration, but above all the sheer loneliness—all served to drive him mad with the desire to be once again whole, to once again be among *healthy* people, rather than those like himself.

Then one day a rumor passed through the dirty little colony in which he lived. There was a new prophet traveling about the area who could do miracles and heal. And the rumor had it that He was something more than the typical charlatans who plied their craft

among the unsuspecting. He truly was sent by God. Part of the leper wanted to rush to the man immediately, to plead his case for healing.

But he had been disappointed so many times before, that *this* time he decided to err on the side of caution. This healer sounded *so* good, that he would first prove to himself that He really was what others claimed.

The prophet came into the area, and the leper observed His manner, His way with the people. From far outside the crowd of people who accompanied Him—so far he could barely hear what was being said—the leper listened to the prophet's words, watched in amazement as He effortlessly healed those who were sick and lame. He was convinced the man could heal him, but how to get to Him? He couldn't just pass through the crowd; the people would never permit it. How could he get close to this healer?

The problem was: Even if he could get near Him, there was no guarantee the man would agree to heal him. Maybe it took connections. He had never seen Him heal other lepers; maybe there was a limit to His powers—or His inclination. But then he realized he was just fooling himself—creating excuses for putting off what would surely be a risky confrontation. He had never seen the prophet do anything but display tenderness and compassion to those He healed. His hand had never been extended to receive payment—only to minister to those who needed



Him. In fact, by now he believed the man was more than a prophet or teacher, more than a healer of broken bodies. He didn't know how, but he was convinced the man's powers were a demonstration of God.

The next day he saw his chance. He had spent the night tucked back in the bushes along the main road into the city, expecting the prophet to pass by, and his scheme had paid off. There were fewer people with the prophet this time, just His immediate band of followers. They were in no hurry, talking amongst themselves at this start of another new day.

Before anyone could stop him, he rushed to the prophet, dropped to his knees in subjection and pleaded, "Please Lord, if You are willing, I know You can make me clean!"

Would His disciples drive him away with sticks? Or would they simply ignore him, and walk on by? Would the prophet be so revolted at the sight of his corrupted body, as so many others had been before, that He'd pull away in disgust and refuse to help him? He knew in his ugliness he couldn't expect the healer to come near him, but if He would only say the word, he could be healed!

There was an awkward moment of silence. His face in the dirt, the leper could only wait. Then he felt a gentle hand on his head—not the angry shove of the fearful, or even the rough, business-like touch of a physician, but the tender touch of someone who loved him.

Loved him.

"I **am** willing." The warm, gentle voice brought comfort in itself. But then He said, "Be cleansed." And immediately a rushing wave passed through him—as if the entirety of the sea had passed through his body in a moment. It felt as if his body, in the blink of an eye, had grown new skin from the inside out, sloughing off the old like a snake shedding its scales. He was not simply healed, but renewed. He was *whole* again!

Do You Love Me?

It is so much easier for us to believe in Christ's deity than in His willingness to love us. The comfortable detachment that exists between heaven and earth makes it easy to worship an all-powerful God of the universe, and to believe that there is a second, mysterious member of the Godhead who is equal to Him in power. But believe that He would love *me*? Small, insignificant, sinful *me*?

That's a tough one.

From our earliest days in Sunday School, seated in a semicircle on tiny chairs with short legs, we've sung

<i>Jesus loves me! this I know,</i>	<i>Yes, Jesus loves me,</i>
<i>For the Bible tells me so;</i>	<i>Yes, Jesus loves me,</i>
<i>Little ones to Him belong;</i>	<i>Yes, Jesus loves me—</i>
<i>They are weak, but He is strong.</i>	<i>The Bible tells me so.</i>
	<i>(Anna B. Warner)</i>

From the beginning that truth has been drummed into our ear, and we can believe it intellectually—of course He loves me; "the Bible tells me so"—but too often in the heat of living it is easier to believe the lie whispered into our other ear, that surely a holy God could never love *me*—the one who thinks those terrible thoughts, who fudges his taxes, who's too quick to yell at her kids, who gets

angry when people don't give way on the freeway. With the leper we say, "You have the power to heal me, but *will* You? You have the grace to love me, but *will* You? Will You love even *me*, Jesus?"

Perhaps we can better understand His steady love for us if we remember that it is not simply a small thing tucked into the back pocket, or even a wonderfully grand thing too overwhelming to hold close to frail flesh, but is something that totally envelops each of us. His love follows behind us:

Surely goodness and lovingkindness
will follow me all the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

(Psalm 23:6)

and it goes before us:

For Your lovingkindness is before my eyes,
And I have walked in Your truth.

(Psalm 26:3)

Indeed, we are totally surrounded by it:

Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
But he who trusts in the Lord,
lovingkindness shall surround him.

(Psalm 32:10)

Believers walk about in an enveloping bubble of love. Every good and pleasant experience coming our way is enhanced by its passage through God's love before it reaches us. Every hard and unpleasant experience is filtered and modified by the supernatural love that surrounds and protects us. Jesus never needs to renew His love for us; our behavior never causes Him to recheck His commitment to our well-being. It is permanently, and irrevocably, there.

Always.

Faith in God is the great charmer of life's cares, and he who possesses it dwells in an atmosphere of grace, surrounded with a body-guard of mercies. May it be given to us of the Lord at all times to believe in the mercy of God, even when we cannot see traces of its working, for to the believer, mercy is as all-surrounding as omniscience, and every thought and act of God is perfumed with it.

(Charles Haddon Spurgeon)

Life passes at a blinding pace. Even when lived at a speed others might find perfectly tranquil, days pile upon each other until they lose all shape and form. And in this condition, we can easily forget the work Jesus does on our behalf. We can forget His steady, unflagging intercession, His advocacy, and His tender compassion brought down around us.

But there is a gentle sweetness added to each day that draws upon His love and consolation. No matter the circumstances, no matter how pleasant or tough life gets, Jesus is there, beside us, wrapping His strong arms about our insecurities and woes. He understands our plight; He's been there. He's suffered more than we can ever imagine: the full force and weight of the earth's transgressions. He knows our frame, and He is quick to come to our rescue when sin has brought us to our knees, on our face before the Father.

Jesus is always within reach. Always.

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