



**Proper 6, Year B – February 15, 2009**

Mark 1.40-45

**Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker**

The man who falls on his knees before Jesus is a pariah -- his hands and feet, even his face, deformed by the ravages of leprosy. Like Hester Prynne, with her scarlet letter, he is an outcast, forced to ring a warning bell everywhere he goes, and to call out "Unclean! unclean!" so that passersby, and yes, even his own mother and children, can avoid contamination, can avoid even having to look at his disfigured appearance. He is dependent upon the kindness of those who might drop off a bit of food near the outskirts of his leper colony, for he dare not show his face in the market. He has been expelled from the synagogue, because he is "blemished", and therefore ceremonially defiled – unable to participate in the rituals of his salvation. It is a wretched existence. It is exile.

This is the man who falls on his knees before Jesus, and begs him, "If you choose, you can make me clean."

If you hear nothing else from this reading, nothing else all morning, hear this: "Jesus stretched out his hand and *touched* him, and said, 'I do choose. Be made clean.'"

He touched him, and said, I do choose.

What is the part of ourselves we dare not show to another for fear of judgment, or even revulsion? What is the part of ourselves that keeps people at a distance? That divides rather than unites? What is the thing that eats away at our full enjoyment of life, disfiguring our souls, our hearts, even our countenance? What is the burden that we have carried for oh so long?

Jesus touched him. I don't imagine even the man himself thought that Jesus would actually "get involved" in his leprosy. Surely a word would have sufficed. But Jesus knows that this illness isn't just a dermatological condition. This illness is about enforced alienation – a condition which could only be reverse by an embrace. Even if it cost Jesus his own ritual cleanliness. Jesus refuses to allow this man to persist in his loneliness – by actually touching the man himself, he "walks the talk", as we say.

And Jesus says, "I do choose." Let there be no question: God *wants* what is best for us: God chooses for us. We may not always know what that best is. We are certainly not always capable of achieving it on our own. And we may not always have the courage to reveal the thing that hurts most. But when we do, when we finally risk an appointment with eternity, "falling on our knees" as it were, we may be assured that God's only desire is for us to be whole again. He will say to us, as Jesus said to the leper, "I do choose. Be made well."