I. The Leper’s Confession of Faith

It is while Jesus is traveling and teaching from town to town in Galilee that the leper comes to him. He’s a dead man walking: leprosy is a disease as incurable as it is fatal and contagious. In fact, the law requires that he stay away from everyone—except any other lepers. But here he is, coming to Jesus.

And what would be the reaction of those gathered around the Lord…? Is he crazy? Who does he think he is? What temerity he possesses to walk up to the Savior! Who is this man, to waste Jesus’ time? The Lord certainly has better things to do, like help the helpable who still have life ahead of them. Furthermore, what does this leper have to offer? You know how the world works—you’ve got to have something to give if you’re going to get something back. There’s no such thing as free health care, and someone as gifted as Jesus should charge a hefty price. So who does this man think that he is? He has no wealth or possessions that he can use to pay. His health and strength are failing, so it’s not like he can do some great thing to help out Jesus.

To the eyes of the world, this man has nothing. This man is nothing. He should just stay away. In the eyes of God, though, this man is one for whom Jesus is born to save. He is not wasting Jesus’ time, because the Savior is there for such as these. Behold what happens next. Hear what the leper says, and marvel at his God-given, astounding confession of faith.

Here it is: “If You are willing, You can make me clean.”

That may not, at first hearing, sound like an astounding confession of faith; so let us take a moment or two to unpack what it says—about the leper and about Jesus.

What does the leper say about himself? Perhaps a better question is, what doesn’t the leper say? He doesn’t bargain. He doesn’t bank on the past and say, “Lord, I’ve done enough good that I think I deserve a good break for once.” He doesn’t make promises about the future, as in, “If you heal me now, I’ll devote my life for you.” He doesn’t try to buy help or barter for it. He doesn’t say, “Jesus, You’ve got to heal me because of who I am, what I have or what I can do.” In fact, all the leper says about himself is that he’s unclean—he’s sick and needs to be healed. The leper is saying, “If You heal me, it is not because of any merit on my part.”

And what does he say about Jesus? I think that we naturally focus on, “You can make me clean.” We’re drawn to the part about the miraculous healing. This is absolutely true: as part of His saving us from the entire curse of sin, Jesus comes to heal. He is able to perform miracles. In this we rejoice, and this is right and proper to do, for Jesus is able. But don’t miss the first part of that
sentence: “If You are willing.” Even as the leper declares that there is nothing about him that he can trade for healing, he also declares that Jesus may still heal him: not because of who the leper is, but because of who Jesus is. “Lord, I am nothing,” says the leper, “and I have nothing to give. But You can still heal me if You desire, because You are the Savior who conquers even leprosy and death.”

That is the leper’s confession: “I am sick and have nothing to give. You can still heal me anyway, because You are Jesus. Your will be done.”

Why is this so astounding? Simply because it is truth—truth that the leper cannot know apart from God’s grace. His old sinful flesh will always prod him to believe he has something to trade for God’s help, and to resent God for the affliction. But by God’s grace, the leper says what is true: “I don’t deserve Your help. But You will still help me according to Your will.”

And so the Savior responds: “I am willing; be cleansed.” He’s willing and He’s able. He speaks His powerful Word, and the man is healed.

II. Willing and Able for You

What does this have to do with you and me? I’m unaware of any lepers in the congregation, but I would point you to a Bible verse that we say all the time in church, and that we’ve said twice already this service. It’s Psalm 32:5: “I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord,’ and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.”

“I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord.’” To anyone who says such a thing, the world really has only one response: “Are you crazy?” After all, this isn’t how the world works. If you want somebody’s help, you’ve got to work for it. You’ve got to have something to trade. It might be goods or services, or at least good behavior. You don’t walk into your employer’s office and say, “I’d like a raise, but first let me tell you how many times I’ve wasted time and the resources of this company.” If you want the police officer to give you a warning instead of a ticket, you don’t say, “This isn’t the first time! As long as you’ve pulled me over, here’s a list of all my traffic infractions to date.” This is how the world works: you do your best to gain the approval of authorities. And where you mess up, you cover it up. You don’t put your worst mistakes and proof of incompetence on your resume.

Now, in these examples, we’re only talking about a boss or a police officer. Being honest with them has consequences that are big enough. So why—why—would it ever seem like a good idea to go before the Lord of heaven and earth and say, “Here are all the ways I have disobeyed You daily and much, wasted all Your gifts and done my best to put my desires before Your holy will”? You would have to be crazy. And if Old Adam can’t convince you that you’re crazy, he’ll work to persuade you that such confession is a crazy waste of time and worship.

But if you are to be crazy, then be “crazy” like the leper. In other words, tell the truth. To “confess” is to say the same thing; and when you confess your sins, you say the same thing about you that God says about you. By His grace, you make the leper’s confession: “Lord, there is nothing about me that deserves help from You. I am unclean, impure, unholy—I am sinful. There is nothing I can do to earn Your help—what do You need my help for?” That’s an honest confession of who you are; and by God’s grace, it goes with a confession of who God is: “But Lord, You have not said that You will help me because of my goodness or works. You have not said You will help me because I clean up
my act or do some great things for You. No, You declare in Your Word that You will to forgive me—not because of who I am, but because of who You are. Furthermore, You declare that You are able to forgive me—not because of what I have done, but for the sake of Jesus Christ, who has died on the cross for me. I in no way deserve Your grace. But You are willing and able to make me clean.” That is the confession of a Christian. That’s an astounding confession of faith. (If you take some time to read through the confession of sin at the top of [TLH] p. 16, you will find this to be the essence of that confession.)

Why so astounding? Because Old Adam wars against it so that there is no way you can believe this truth except by God-given faith. Only by His grace can you say, “I am a sinner, but You are willing and able to make me clean.” In fact, every other religion in the world teaches that you must prove your worth to God before He will save you. Every other religion works the same way the world works—not according to the will of God.

And make no mistake: your own sinful flesh doesn’t like this confession one bit. It will work hard to make you deny it: either deny that you don’t deserve God’s grace, or deny that God is willing and able to forgive you solely for Jesus’ sake. Even within the visible church today, it is taught that Jesus has forgiveness for you if you earn it by your works—but this denies that you are a sinner who can do nothing to save yourself. Even within the visible church today, it is taught that Jesus forgives you on the condition that you plan to amend your sinful life, that you are taking out a loan that you will repay by doing better in the future. And even today, preachers go out of their way to mock this confession, brashly declaring, “I’m not poor, I’m not miserable, and I’m not a sinner.”

Our Lutheran Confessions, as dictated by Scripture, are very careful to keep this doctrine correct. There are consequences for getting this wrong. For instance, if we get it wrong and believe that there is something about us that earns God’s favor, then we declare that the Scriptures are in error for declaring that no one is righteous. Furthermore, if part of us needs to be worthy to earn God’s favor, we can never be sure if we are worthy enough and our salvation is no longer sure. On the other hand, if we get it wrong and declare that God needs us to be willing and able to help in our salvation, then we rob Jesus of His glory. We say that His suffering and death weren’t quite enough to win our salvation, and that He needs our help to save us. (That’s like a patient in cardiac arrest saying, “The doctor couldn’t have saved my life without my being there.”)

That is, after all, what we are: the living dead, lost in sin and completely unable to save ourselves. In pondering this during the past week, it leaves me thinking of worship. I daresay there are Sundays when anyone is less than enthusiastic about getting up and going to church, when a lazy morning or some sort of entertainment is more attractive. And I daresay there are Sundays when we consider our Lord’s forgiveness to be unnecessary or insufficient. Beware of Old Adam at work at such times, because he is trying to convince you that your leprosy isn’t so bad, that you aren’t in need of healing. Our reluctance for our Lord’s means of grace only betrays our need for them all the more. After all, the Savior is present here, willing and able to cleanse you.

Beware. Even though you know better—even though you’re well catechized that salvation is all the Lord’s work, you’ll be tempted otherwise today: and you may well succumb before you know it. In times of trial, it’s so easy to bargain with the Lord in prayer: “Lord, if You deliver me from this, then I will do that.” Or, “If I only had more faith, then He would help me.” This is to say, “Lord, I believe that I must do something for You before You do this for me.” For such prayers, repent—and rejoice that the Lord already promises to deliver us, for Jesus’ sake, according to His will.
Likewise, when troubled, it is easy to think, “I wonder what I have done to deserve God’s heavy hand? He must still be angry with me for my sin.” That is to believe that Jesus hasn’t died for all of your sins; it is to believe that God will love you more if you only act better. Ah, but the Gospel is much better news: God already loves you so much for Jesus’ sake that He could not love you more! Once again, repent for such prayers—and rejoice that the Lord already promises that He loves you and will deliver you for Jesus sake.

That is why we are gathered here—better, that is why He gathers us here. Infected with the leprosy of sin through and through, there is no way humanly possible that we could draw near to God. So the Lord draws near to us in His means of grace—to give forgiveness, life and salvation. You may arrive here conscience-stricken, the leprosy of guilt eating away at your soul. But the Lord says to you, “Your conscience declares your sickness to you, that you cannot save yourself. I am able to save you, and I am willing: be cleansed. You are forgiven.”

You may arrive burdened with a frightening illness, troubled at the deterioration you see in your own body. The Lord declares, “Look at the leper in the text. As I was able and willing to cleanse him, I am able and willing to cleanse you—in My time, according to My will. And while I may wait to heal you of this disease, you may be sure that it is My will this day to forgive your sins, declare you pure and holy and righteous. I am willing: be cleansed.”

You may arrive in the doldrums, a life a quiet desperation with Old Adam clawing at your back, seeking to persuade you that attendance here is a worthless waste of time—and no wonder, because God’s grace kills Old Adam. But here the Lord declares, “Apart from me, you would only be sick and soiled with sin unto death. But I am able and willing to deliver you, and that is why I am here: be cleansed.” (This is the solution to dissatisfaction with worship: as we understand the depth of our sin and the enormity of God’s grace in Christ, we’ll run to His Word and Sacrament like a dying patient runs to a miracle cure—because that is precisely who we, and His means of grace, are.)

I’ve heard the criticism more than once that Lutherans spend too much time on how sinful they are. We only do so because we speak the truth of Scripture. And as we do so, we see the grace of our Lord for what it truly is: free, cleansing, totally by the Lord’s work and merit. Like the leper in the text, be assured that you’re not wasting the Lord’s time. He was born and crucified and raised for you. That is why you are sure of your salvation today: the Lord is willing and able for you to be cleansed—so you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen