

The Great Physician

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[0 : 00] Good morning to everybody. Welcome. Glad that you're here at Church of the Advent. Not used to using a handheld mic, so we're going to see how this goes. We had some issues with the wireless headsets. It's much more comfortable, I have to say. Did not have that on my head. But welcome to you if you're new. My name's Tommy. I'm a pastor here. Very exciting.

Some of you are here in particular because we're going to be celebrating a baptism in a little while. Finn is going to be baptized. So as many of you know, that's one of my personal favorite things we get to do as a family. So very excited about that. Before we do that, we're going to turn our attention to God's Word here in Luke's Gospel. Big news, as I'm sure you all know, coronavirus is on all the headlines. I don't have to tell you, this is a big deal.

Rising rates of infection, rising mortality rates, seems to be getting worse and worse every day. Laura and I recently heard Dr. Francis Collins talk, who's the head of the NIH, and we heard him talk about this virus, and he said this is serious stuff. And the great physicians of the world are working to try to contain it and to try to cure it. And he said that Christians should be praying for this. And so we should be. We should be praying as Christians that the cure is found quickly that it's able to be contained. And yet, as we turn to Luke's Gospel, as awful as coronavirus is, and many of the viruses and illnesses that plague the world, the Bible actually says that there's a worse kind of sickness that requires an even greater physician. In Luke chapter 5, verses 12 through 32, which Kevin just read, Jesus actually refers to himself as a physician, which is very important.

And he says, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. And the world has a kind of sickness that the Bible describes by using the word sin. And it's important to think about it this way, because I think most of us, when we hear a word like sin, it sounds archaic and old-fashioned. And we often associate it with the idea of doing bad things. I sin, I commit sins. But the way the Bible talks about it is much more akin to an infection or an illness. And it has a 100% infection rate, and it has a 100% mortality rate. And there's really only one hope for a cure, and that is the great physician, Jesus Christ. And that's what this passage is all about.

[2 : 35] Luke shows us three encounters that Jesus the physician has with various people who need various kinds of healing. And in each case, we see how Jesus brings healing in ways that meet all of our needs and restore all of the ways that our world and we are damaged by sin. So, we're going to look at each of these encounters and learn what it means to come to Jesus as the great physician in the hope of a cure.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for Finn and the baptism that we're about to celebrate. And Lord, we pray that as we open your word, it would reveal to us why something like baptism is so important, why you matter so much, why whatever distractions may be tugging at our minds right now, our eyes and our hearts need to be firmly fixed on you and your word. We pray that you would move us out of the way, Lord, that we all would receive what you have for us this morning.

In your son's holy name, amen. So, Jesus the physician, the first encounter that Luke shares with us in this passage is an encounter with a man who has leprosy. And the word leprosy in this point in history could be used to refer to any of a variety of illnesses that resulted in physical disfigurement. It's kind of an umbrella term. But this man is disfigured, and he comes and he throws himself at Jesus' feet and asks to be healed. But in order to understand what's going on, we have to understand the meaning of being someone with leprosy in the first century. If you were somebody with leprosy, you would have been an outcast, a social outcast. You would have been considered unclean, and so you would be shunned by society. You would be stigmatized. You would be, in some cases, considered to be cursed by God. And so people like this were not allowed into the towns. People wouldn't talk to them or associate them or even go near them. Anybody in normal,

polite society knew to stay away.

And the fear was that the uncleanness, the spiritual uncleanness of leprosy was contagious. So if I, as a clean person, talk to, associate with, or come in contact with someone who is unclean because of their leprosy, I would catch their uncleanness. I might also catch the leprosy. So they were cast out of society. And knowing this, I think, helps us to fully appreciate what happens next and how amazing it is. This man falls on his face, begs Jesus to heal him. And what does Jesus say?

He says, I will be clean. And then he reaches out and touches this man, which is an incredible act of compassion. If you know anything about lepers in society in this day and age, it had probably been years since this man had felt any human contact. If you know anything about Jesus and his power, it's not necessary for Jesus to touch you, to heal you. Jesus can heal with a thought from halfway around the world. But Jesus nevertheless reaches out and touches this man.

[6 : 01] I will be clean. It's an action that is purely motivated by compassion. Superfluous, unnecessary act of love. And yet what it means is something even more profound.

People avoided people with leprosy because they believed their uncleanness was contagious. If a clean person comes in contact with an unclean person, they become unclean. But what this shows us is that with Jesus Christ, the opposite is true. With Jesus Christ, holiness is contagious. When Jesus Christ comes in contact with you, when he touches you, his holiness, his cleanness is contagious.

And you become clean. And you become holy when he touches your life. So no matter who you are or where you've come from, no matter what your background is, when you come to Jesus, when you ask to be healed, and when Jesus reaches out and when Jesus touches your life, you become clean. And you become holy.

And this is why, after Jesus heals this man, he says, now you immediately need to go to the temple, and you need to present yourself to the priests there. The reason is so that the priests, this was part of their job description, could examine this man. They could determine the leprosy was gone.

They could then therefore determine that he was spiritually clean, and they could declare that to society so that this man could return to and rejoin society. So this is an act not only of physical healing, but much more significant is the social healing. He is repairing the torn social fabric between this man with leprosy and the rest of society. Now he can be around his family and his friends. He can get a job. He can become a part of the society of clean people. And this is incredibly restored, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually. So what we see is that Jesus is able to bring social healing. And he specifically reaches out to the outcasts. And that matters to us as Christians because the world is full of outcasts. DC is full of outcasts. DC is full of people who don't fit in because they're socially awkward, or because they've simply fallen through the cracks, or people who have been bullied, or people who struggle with mental illness, or people who for a variety of reasons have been stigmatized and don't fit into proper society. And they don't know what it's like to belong. And now more than ever before, loneliness is an actual full-on epidemic that is arguably more pervasive and more harmful even than the coronavirus. They say that loneliness is physically detrimental to your body. It is on par, some research says, with smoking 15 cigarettes a day in terms of the impact that it has on things like your heart health, not to mention the rising rates of suicide among people who live their daily lives alone. This is, and I know this is going to feel like a random pivot here, this is one of the reasons why people like Lady Gaga are so popular. Right? If you're familiar with Lady Gaga, whatever you may think of her music, I think that she's very talented as an artist. But one of the reasons for her sort of meteoric rise is from the very beginning of her sort of public, the development of her public persona, she intentionally identified with the outcasts. She said, my people are the people who have been bullied, the people who have been shunned, the people who have been told that they're freaks, the people who have been told that they don't belong, that they don't fit in, the people who have never had a crowd to call their own, the people on the outside of the clique. The name for her fans is Monsters, and that's what it's meant to convey.

[10 : 05] And what we should pay attention to, whatever you think of her music, what we should pay attention to is the response. Her fans love her. They are indefatigably loyal to her because finally they have somebody who is willing publicly to identify with them, to represent them, and to allow them to belong.

So you say, well, what are you saying? That the church should be like Lady Gaga? Well, here's what I'm saying. If somebody like her could do that, how much more should the church be able to do something like that?

Because we have a Savior who has done just that. A Savior who says, I will be clean, and then touches this man, associates with this man, breaks a dozen different social taboos in the process. So everybody, everybody needs to belong. And if the church is in a place where people can experience that kind of welcome and belonging, I don't know what is. And so this is the kind of healing that Jesus brings.

Social healing. He's able to reach out and touch people and make them holy, make them saints, welcome them into the community. And that's a kind of healing that we need because God didn't create human beings to live as outcasts.

[11 : 24] It literally kills us when we experience that. So that's the first kind of healing we see. But then we have to go a step further because as much as social healing matters, the next encounter shows us that there's an even more crucial kind of healing that we need from Jesus because of the infection of sin that we have in the world. And we see this through his encounter with this paralyzed man. In this second encounter, Jesus is teaching in a home. It might very well, by the way, be Jesus' house. He was in Capernaum. He's staying with Peter and his family.

It doesn't tell us where he is, but because it doesn't tell us, it's very likely that this was his home where he was staying. So Jesus is in his house with Peter's house, and somebody rips a hole in his roof and lowers a man down, right? So he would be rightfully upset. He could be very justifiably upset. But his response is not only to not be upset, it's altogether bizarre because these friends, they bring their friend on a mat. They want him to be physically healed. It's very obvious that this man is paralyzed. It's very obvious why they brought him to Jesus, why they went to the trouble to tear the hole. And yet what happens? What happens?

He looks at this man and he says, your sins are forgiven. And of course, everybody is utterly confused by this, right? The friends are confused because they were like, okay, that's nice, but we wanted him to be able to walk. The religious leaders are scandalized. They say, how can Jesus claim to forgive sins? They start grumbling to one another. This is blasphemy. This is a direct claim of divinity coming from Jesus, right? I mean, imagine if you went out of town for a month, and as you left, you called one of your friends and said, will you house sit for me? Your friend says, yeah, you go out of town. And then while you're gone, your friend just acts like they own the place, right? They sleep in your bed. They eat all your food. They let your plants die. Your pets escape. They throw huge parties and invite all these people in. They completely trash your place. And then imagine you come back from being out of town for a month. You discover that your house is completely wrecked and destroyed. And you confront your friend and you say, what did you do to my house? I thought you were going to take care of it.

And your friend says, well, it's okay. I went and talked to my pastor, and my pastor actually already said that he forgave me for, so it's okay. It's no big deal. And you say, well, that's nice that you talked to a spiritual leader about this, but the only one who can forgive you is the one who was wronged, right? You need my forgiveness. It was my house. And the same is true when we talk about sin.

Sin is essentially living in God's world and treating it like it's our own, right? And so the only one who can forgive that is the one to whom the world belongs, which is God himself. So when Jesus says this, it's this direct claim of divinity. And then to prove his point, Jesus says this in verse 23. He says, which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven or rise and walk? And then before anybody answers, in order to show that his words have power, Jesus tells this man, rise up and walk. And he does.

[14 : 42] Which means, if Jesus says to you, your sins are forgiven, they are. And this is the point that Jesus wants to make to this crowd. As much as we need social healing, as much as the social fabric of society needs to be re-woven, as much as we need to bring the outcasts of the world into a community and a family where they can belong, our greatest need is actually spiritual healing. It's not the healing of our horizontal relationships. Our greatest need is the vertical relationship that we have with God. That's the thing that needs to be healed first and foremost. Because most of us are like this man on this map. I know I am. I know I was. You come to Jesus with some vague sense of what you hope to get from him. We all start out this way. If you remember a time in your life when you came to Jesus for the first time, you probably had some vague idea of what you were hoping that would mean for you. Maybe you want a little help finding a job or a little help finding a spouse. Or maybe you're going through a time of anxiety or depression. Or maybe you need a breakthrough professionally.

Or maybe you need to be healed in some way spiritually or emotionally or physically. And for a lot of people, the first time they really reach out to God is when they feel a need like that. And the hard truth is Jesus doesn't always heal us in the ways that we believe we need to be healed. You come to Jesus and you pray for a very real need in your life and sometimes you don't get the answer that you were hoping for.

But the point of this passage is this. While that may or may not happen for reasons only God knows, when we come to Jesus and ask for forgiveness, Jesus always forgives. Every single time. His death on the cross was the guarantee for this.

And this passage makes that clear because, I don't know if you noticed this, people like to kind of gloss over this because it makes us uncomfortable. But Jesus is so ready to forgive sin that he doesn't even wait for this man to speak. Right? Jesus doesn't say, and I think oftentimes we can think of Jesus as being more like this. You know, the man is lowered down and Jesus says, oh, you want to be healed?

And he says, yeah. And he says, is there anything else you want? And the man says, what do you mean? Is there anything else you want? Now, trying to get him to say the formula so that then Jesus doesn't wait for the formula. He doesn't wait for the man to utter the words. He doesn't wait to see if the man genuinely wants it. He proactively forgives him. I don't really know what to do with that theologically. But what it shows is that it's Jesus' prerogative to forgive.

[17:22] And he is ready to forgive. He will take the slightest opportunity to forgive because that's the reason he came as the great physician to bring spiritual healing to the world. And this is good news if we believe that spiritual healing is our greatest need. If we don't, it won't make sense.

If we're too focused on the need right in front of us, it's not going to mean much to us. But if we realize that under all of those other needs, the broken relationship with God is our biggest need, this is good news. So Jesus offers both social healing, horizontal healing, and vertical healing, our relationship with God. He offers both. And, you know, what's interesting is it's, you know, I think churches can sometimes get focused on one or the other. There's some churches that only focus on healing social relationships, bringing social justice in the world. And there are some churches churches that only focus on getting people saved, right? Neither has the full picture. Jesus came to bring both. And yet he came to bring a whole lot more than that. Because it's not just about getting saved, and it's not just about building a great community where people can belong. There's a whole lot more. That's just the beginning. And we see this last piece of it in Jesus' encounter with the tax collector. Any first century Jew reading this passage, they would read about the man with leprosy, and they would feel tremendous compassion for this man. They would read about the man who's paralyzed, and they would feel compassion for the man who's paralyzed. They would want Jesus to heal these people, to forgive these people. That would be wonderful to read. But then when they read about Levi, they would only feel hatred and scorn. Because a tax collector was the worst kind of person in this society. A tax collector was a Jew who had contracted with the Romans. They were the ones with all of the power and the privilege, or the occupiers. This is a Jewish person who had contracted with those people in power. And in order to make personal profit, they exploited their own people for financial gain.

They were sellouts. Not only did they betray their own people, but they actually many times exploited them to get rich. So this is like a modern-day drug lord, or a pimp, somebody who doesn't bat an eye at abusing or exploiting people in order to line their own pockets. And yet Jesus seeks this man out, right? There's probably all of these other people around him who are clamoring for his attention.

And Jesus is weaving through the crowd, kind of, you know, passing through this, no, no, no. And then he finds Levi, the worst kind of person, the most hated person, a betrayer. And he says, I want you.

Come and follow me. And Levi, it's a spiritually profound response, immediately leaves everything behind. Leaves his job, his house, his entire way of life, and he becomes a follower of Jesus. And the thing that we need to recognize here is this invitation to follow Jesus is way more than just come learn a few things from me. This is all about identification. Jesus is reaching out and touching this man's life. Jesus is saying to Levi, from this point forward, no longer will you be known as a betrayer.

[20:51] No longer will you be known as an exploiter of the poor. From this moment on, once you're my follower, you are going to be entirely defined by me. People will know you and associate

you with me.

It's a new identity. My reputation, my identity is going to be imparted to you. And in following me, Jesus is saying, as we share daily life together on the road as my follower, you're going to become more and more and more like me. So you're going to get this new identity from the start, and then you're going to begin to learn how to live into that identity. You're going to take on my characteristics.

That's what discipleship means. And we know that this was a successful ministry because the other name that we use for Levi is the name Matthew. And Matthew is the one who, of course, eventually came to write one of the four gospels, the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament. Right? So Matthew, the tax collector, is one of the first gospels that we encounter that shares the good news about Jesus.

While the first encounter shows us social healing, the second encounter shows us spiritual healing, the story of Levi is all about our desperate need for personal healing. Right? When Jesus calls us to leave everything and follow him, he's saying, I can cleanse you, I can forgive you, I can reconcile you to other people and to God, but that's not all you need. From that point forward, you need to relearn how to live. Right? So think about if you've gotten very sick in your life, and maybe some of you have, or have friends or family who have, and maybe you're bedridden for a really long time, your body doesn't work right. And then, and then praise God that you, you are restored, you're healed, but you've been in bed so long, you've been sick so long, that your muscles have atrophied, and your body isn't working right. And even though you're healed, you need to go through rehabilitation, you need to work with physical therapists and occupational therapists, you need to learn how to live again as a healed, healthy person. It's the same spiritually, right? We are forgiven, we're cleansed, but a lot of

Christians think that's it. Like you get forgiven, and then you're done. And you know, that's the last chapter. But that's just the beginning. For the rest of the life after that, we need rehabilitation. We need to learn how to walk again, and talk again, and love again, and have relationships again. We need to learn what our priorities need to be, and what matters in the world, and how to think, and how to interpret, make sense of suffering, and how to rely on God, and what trust means, how to forgive.

[23 : 33] All of these things, we have to learn. It's all spiritual rehab, personal healing. And once Levi begins to get a taste of this new life, what's the first thing he does? He goes, and he throws a party, right? He uses his home and his resources, throws a party, and who does he invite to the party? He goes out and finds every tax collector he can. He's like, you got to meet this guy. You got to see what this guy's done. You got to see what this guy's like. You got to see, the difference in my life, because I've been knowing and following this guy. You know, that's the great thing. Anybody who has been really meaningfully transformed by Jesus Christ, you don't have to tell a person like that to go evangelize, right? They will do it naturally as an overflow of their joy, right? They will do it because they have experienced something. They want everybody they know and love to experience the same thing.

So Jesus, the great physician, is able to bring social healing. He's able to bring spiritual healing. He's able to bring personal healing. And this is a time in the life of our church where we're really thinking about what kind of church do we want to be. Going through a lot of transition right now. So we're looking ahead. And here's what I'll say about that. If we as a church are serious about following Jesus, which is one of the things that defines us, then we need to be serious about social healing, spiritual healing, and personal healing, personal renewal.

And the thing that you realize if you begin to really ask what that means is that if you as a church are focused on all three, you're not easily going to fit into categories like liberal or conservative. You're going to be weird. You're going to be irksome to many people because you won't quite fit the mold, right? Imagine, just to make a comparison here, imagine that you go to your doctor, maybe this has happened to you. It may or may not have happened to me. Imagine you go to your doctor and your doctor, after looking at your blood work and all of that, says, I have some bad news. You're so out of shape that unless you start exercising and changing your life right now, you're going to die a premature death. You say, okay, I hear you. I'm going to do what I need to do. So you go home and you start researching health clubs and exercise clubs. You got, I got to join gym. I got to make some changes here. And imagine you find there are two health clubs near your house and they happen to be on opposite sides of the street. There's one on the right and there's one on the

left. And imagine you want to compare them and figure out where you're going to go to turn your life around. And you look at the club on the right and you're like, wow, they take fitness very seriously over here. They are, the exercise equipment is state of the art. Exercise programs are state of the art. It's all internet integrated. This is amazing. But then you look at the people and every single person there is like toned and tan and beautiful and they look amazing in spandex.

And imagine you kind of look down at yourself and you see your belly kind of hanging over your lululemons and you're like, yeah, that's the last place I want to go, right? And you look at yourself and you look at them and you're like, I'm never going to fit into a place like that. I walk in the door there, they're going to laugh at me. They're going to judge me behind my back. So, okay, what about the club on the left? So then you go to the club on the left, you do a little research. You realize, oh my gosh, they're so welcoming. They're so amazing. You look around, they're all different kinds of people. Some like me, some completely different and, oh, much less spandex here, a lot more sweatpants. So you feel a lot more comfortable there. And then you kind of notice, well, you know, you say, what about your exercise programs? You look around, you realize there's no exercise equipment anywhere. No exercise equipment. And then you talk to one of the the trainers and you're like, well, you know, how to, where do I exercise? And, you know, I need to get in shape. And they say, oh, oh, listen, listen. We don't use phrases like morbid obesity or heart disease. We don't talk about high cholesterol because we don't want to be judgmental.

[27 : 37] Those are judgmental terms. All diets are equally valid and equally true. And whatever diet you want is going to be right for you. And you realize that it's not so much like a workout gym as it is a kind of buffet. And you look and there's pizza and donuts and ice cream. And most people are just sitting around eating pizza and donuts and watching Wheel of Fortune on television. And you realize, so which gym are you going to go to? Which gym, right? If those are your only two choices, where are you going to go? Where's the hope? And of course, you know, when we talk about sin, we're talking about a spiritual diagnosis, right? Scripture's saying, you're in really bad shape spiritually. And unless you make some major changes, unless you make major changes, you're headed for disaster, right? And yet, when you look, most churches are kind of like those health clubs, right? There are some churches that you look at and they take holiness very seriously. But they give you this sense, sometimes unintentionally, many times unintentionally, that you have to get your act together. You have to have your doctrine and your life and your morality completely squared away before you will ever be accepted there. And you're constantly worried in a place like that that people are talking about you behind your back.

Right? And yet, there are other places where you go and you sort of feel like, you know, they're all about including, they're all about being as diverse as possible. They say, come as you are, you're fine the way you are, but there's no growth and no change and no transformation. And you know, deep down, when you look at yourself, you need some help. So, where do you go, right? Where's the hope?

Communities on the right demand change before you can belong. Communities on the left say, you can belong, but there's no hope of change. Jesus calls us, I believe, in this passage to a third way. Right?

Unlike people on the left, Jesus says, sin is real. The diagnosis is real. He says at the end of this passage, I came to call sinners to repentance. That's why I'm here. I didn't just come to be a life coach.

I came to take people who were spiritually headed for disaster and turn their lives around. I came to call sinners to repentance. Unlike people on the right, Jesus embraces us while we are still in our sin, where we are still unfit, where we still are filled with doubts. We still have no idea what way is up. He embraces us. He reaches out and he touches the leper and he makes him clean. He forgives the sin of the paralyzed man before he even asks. He calls Levi to follow him even as he's sitting at his tax booth. And this is the kind of culture we're trying to build at Church of the Advent.

[30 : 28] A culture where on the one hand, it's okay to have doubts and to be broken and to be socially awkward and to be mentally ill and to not know how to fit in, to not know how to have friends, to not have a family, to not have kids, to not be married, to not have a job. All of the things that might lead one to, this is a community where people like that can come and we will be your family. You will belong here.

And yet we take sin seriously and we encourage one another daily to follow Jesus because we believe that when Jesus comes and he touches your life, he makes you holy and you become a

saint. And we want to know what it means to live like saints in the world until he returns. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the hope of the gospel and we thank you that your gospel can be lived out, albeit imperfectly, in communities. And we pray that this would be a gospel-centered community where we are taking sin seriously and yet we are taking love and gracious hospitality just as seriously.

And we pray that through this, Lord, we would follow you and would know more what it is to be identified with you. And we thank you that all of this is true because you first identified with us and gave yourself for us. And it's in this hope and in the name of Jesus Christ that we pray. Amen. Amen.