

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

Mark 1:40-45
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
February 15, 2015

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Kids, I have here a **card** from my daughter Leah. Leah lives a long ways from here and she is right now traveling all over South America by herself. We were so glad to get this card from her. In the card we can **read** how she is doing and how much she loves us. Cards are nice. **Telephone calls** are nicer. In a call we can **hear her say** how well she is doing and how much she loves us. Calls are nice. **Skyping** is even better.

Yesterday we skyped with Leah and there we could **hear and see** how she is doing and how much she loves us. Skyping is very nice. But, best of all, when she is done with this crazy traveling time, she will **come home** and we will be able to **hear and see and even hug her**. We are sure looking forward to her coming home.

Kids, in our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus heals a man who is dying from a terrible skin disease. The man couldn't even live in his own town, or with his own family. He had to stay away from people so that others wouldn't catch his terrible disease. When Jesus healed the man, it meant that he could go back home to his family and friends. That had to be so good!

Jesus asked the man not to tell anyone what Jesus had done for him. Why not? Isn't healing a good thing? Why wouldn't Jesus want anyone to know? The man went and told everyone anyway and then all kinds of people kept chasing after Jesus looking for more healing. And that should be good too right? Yes, but Jesus wanted the people to know more about him than just that he could do miracles of healing. Jesus wanted the people to **know how much he loved and cared about them**.

What did Jesus finally do that shows the whole world how much God in Jesus loves and cares about us? Jesus died on the cross for us. Jesus died to win our battle with sickness, with evil, with death. Jesus died to love us more than anyone else ever could. Jesus died to keep us as God's children forever. I can see how much my daughter loves me in a card, a phone call or by skyping. But, nothing beats me being able to hold her in my arms and hear her say those words into my ears. We all need to hear those words. God also longs to have us close to God. God says "**I love you**" and God loves when we answer, "**I love you too God**." Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

The **Aitkin All Stars Dance Team** did extremely well at state! The **Aitkin Wrestling Team** took second in sections. The **One Act Play Team** took fourth in sections. Our **confirmation kids** delight in serving at the Sharing Bread Soup Kitchen in Brainerd. Our **sophomores** made amazing projects as a part of affirming their faith in Jesus. Many of the projects became gifts to others. Two **new children's choirs** are up and running at First. Our **Sunday school kids** made beautiful Valentine cards for Pastor Bob to deliver to our nursing home folks. There is so much wonderful stuff happening amongst our kids.

The **January 25th Brainerd Dispatch** ran an article entitled, "**Emotions Run High at Sentencing in Overdose Death Case.**" Two men admitted to providing the drugs that led to **Tara Fitzgerald**, a Woodbury teenager's death. "It was revealed during Thomas Fitzgerald's statement that his daughter died at their home while he and his wife slept upstairs. A girl who was with Tara when she ingested the drug, known as **25i-NBOMe**, watched her moan and convulse as she began to overdose, he told the court. Thomas Fitzgerald said the friend called another friend, but never came up to tell him Tara was in distress because she was afraid of getting in trouble."

On the same page of this paper, a parent writes:

"Dear Abby."

My 15-year-old daughter's best friend took her life today. My daughter is devastated. As a parent, I don't know what to do. I'm afraid to go to bed this evening because I want her to fall asleep before me. It hurts not being able to take that pain from your child. I want to hold her in my arms tonight. She needs her space, but I don't know how to help her. I don't know how it feels to be so young and lose a best friend by her own hand. What can I do?

How do I take the pain away?

We've got to give our kids **more than just a-happy-times, everything-is-rosy kind of a God.** They are living in a real and threatening world. They need a trustworthy and sacrificially loving God.

One of our teens shared a **Michael Jackson** song with me. This young person said that they listen to this song **whenever they are feeling down**

and lonely. I think that this is Michael Jackson singing a love song. But our young friend hears it as **words of promise from Jesus**. The song is called:

You Are Not Alone

Another day has gone. I'm still all alone. How could this be? You're not here with me. You never said goodbye. Someone tell me why did you have to go and leave my world so cold?

Every day I sit and ask myself, "How did love slip away?" Something whispers in my ear and says, "That you are not alone. I am here with you. Though you're far away, I am here to stay. But you are not alone. I am here with you. Though we're far apart, you're always in my heart..."

Just the other night, I thought I heard you cry, asking me to come and hold you in my arms. I can hear your prayers. Your burdens I will bear. But first I need your hand, then forever can begin. Every day I sit and ask myself how did love slip away? Something whispers in my ear and says, "**That you are not alone.**"

We need to give our kids, our families, our community, **more than just a happy-times, everything-is-rosy kind of a God**. That's why Jesus didn't want to hang around for the accolades when he healed the man who had leprosy...

Leprosy was a dreaded disease that gradually ate away your skin and then extremities. Eventually the victim would die a horrible death. When you caught the disease you had to leave home, family and community. You had to live in the wilderness outside of town and rely upon begging to survive. Whenever anyone came close, you had to call out, "**Unclean! Unclean!**" No one touched lepers because you could die of leprosy yourself. Lepers were considered unworthy even to come into the presence of God anymore.

Our Gospel lesson comes once again from the first chapter in Mark. In short order, Jesus, at the very start of his mission, has confronted and defeated a **demon**, a **fever** and now **leprosy**. Lepers were out of bounds, **steer clear!** This Jesus, whom we today have gathered to listen to and worship, recognizes no such boundaries. "**Jesus stretched out his hand**

and touched him.” This story is about faith – the leper had begged for Jesus’ help. But the story is even more about Jesus, “**moved with pity,**” Jesus not only touched, but healed him. Then Jesus instructed him to go back to see the priest so that he could be declared healed and return to his home, family and community. Can you imagine how free and thankful the man must have felt? This disease had ripped apart his body, his family, his life and community. Then Jesus, God, in one simple touch, gave it all back to him. Jesus instructed him to say nothing to anyone. But the man immediately started telling everyone and Jesus had to leave in order to escape the crowds that sought him out...

The man had **seen** Jesus’ pity. And he was **set free** by Jesus’ power to work miracles. But the man had not yet truly **experienced the depths of Jesus’ love and faithfulness.**

Our kids need to see, hear and touch the Jesus who is there for them not only when they **do well at the state meet,** but when they **don’t even win a game.** They need to see the God who is there for them not only when they **get their driver’s license,** but also when they have their **car accident.** Our kids need a God who loves and will not let them go both when they are in the **embrace of their friendship circle** and when they **don’t think that they have a friend** in the world. They need a God who loves and cares for them whether they are **praying to God** or **cursing with God’s Name.** Or **think that there is no God...**

It seems like Jesus was not willing to be the **one-shot god,** the **single-event god,** the **wish-granting god.** Jesus is not the **get-me-a-parking-space** god or the **all-you-can-eat-ribs** God, or the **give-me-more-stuff** god. Jesus couldn’t stop at helping people with problems, big as they might be. We are talking about the **God who created you.** We are talking about the **Creator of all that is.** And **even bigger,** in God’s eyes, than all of that, **is Jesus/God in pursuit of us.** Jesus will not stop until you and I and every person has been **set free to rest in the embrace** of the **God who loves us to the death, resurrection and eternal life with God.**

Before you can know how Almighty God feels about you, you need to meet him **hanging, bloody and tortured, from a wicked cross of death.** That’s where Jesus was headed as he stopped, here and there along the way, to touch people’s lives with love and healing.

God wants to hug you with love and life. And God longs to have you hug God back. Our daughter, Leah, is traveling all over South America on a journey of discovery. I think that she is **looking for herself**. She has communicated with us via cards, phone calls, skype – all good and wonderful. But we so long for the day when she **returns safe and sound to rest in our embrace**. We wait with eager anticipation. And while she travels, **we count on her being in God's embrace**.

Jesus cares deeply about the physical, emotional and spiritual hurts and needs in our lives. But most importantly of all, Jesus cares about keeping us in a **life-giving relationship with God**. That's where he was headed when he left that healed leper 2,000 years ago. That's where he is still headed today.

During the six weeks of Lent that stretch out ahead of us, here at First Lutheran Church, we are going to be **renewing our efforts to understand where Jesus is headed** in our **own, individual lives** and in **this faith family and community**. Will you walk together with your faith family during this Lenten season? Will you walk with Jesus?

Starting with **Ash Wednesday worship**, this coming Wednesday, 6:00 p.m., we will be intentionally seeking **what Jesus is calling us to do** and **where Jesus is calling us to go**. Starting that day, each of us is challenged to read the **Book of Acts**. Acts recounts the way God began to shape the early Christian Church. Each Wednesday after that, we will hear fellow members share ways that they have **seen God at work** in their own lives and in this faith family. We will also **listen for what the Holy Spirit has to say to each of us personally** and **to our church**.

Will our kids know, deep down in their hearts, that **Jesus is the kind of God who hangs around even when the bottom falls out**, even when we die?

What is Jesus saying to you today? What will Jesus say to you and to all of us in the weeks ahead? **Jesus showed up, touched the leper and changed his life. Jesus will show up for us too**. You might want to plan to be here. Thanks be to God. Amen.

