“If you choose, you can make me clean”. The leper’s words of entreaty touch the heart of Jesus. “Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper, and said “I do choose. Be made clean!” We need to take note of a curious fact about vs. 41. Some ancient manuscripts translate this verse not as “Jesus moved with pity” but as “Jesus moved with anger”. I believe this is in fact noted in your pew Bibles for those following along. Now how could that be? Jesus could not have been angry with the leper could he? Whichever word we choose here – pity or anger will dramatically affect our interpretation of the text. And to this question we will return. As I pondered this text over the past week, I found myself wondering: why did Jesus touch the leper? Couldn’t Jesus, the worker of miracles have brought about the healing of the leper without actually touching him and become unclean himself? Jesus touched the leper because he knew that there is something very powerfully healing about human touch. And ever since then, touch has remained an important aspect of the church’s healing ministry. When a pastor goes to visit the sick in the hospital, it is common practice to take hands as a prayer of healing is offered. When the church has a healing service, the laying on of hands has been an essential part of that tradition. We know from experience how important is touch, and human contact. At every stage in life, from birth to death and every point in between, human beings have a deeply physical and emotional need to be touched. Human beings need to be touched in order to be healthy. There is something powerfully healing about human touch.

And so Jesus touched the leper and in vs. 42 we are told: “Immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean”. A warm, life-giving power moved through Jesus into the leper. And as the healing power flowed, the leper looked with amazement and joy as his body was healed. Christ’s touch healed the leper of his bodily condition. But Christ’s healing goes much deeper. Christ did not treat the leper as an object possessing a biomedical symptom; no, Christ responded to the whole person. In other healing stories
throughout the Gospel, Jesus often said to those healed “your faith has made you well”. What is explicit in other stories is implicit here: Christ needed the active involvement of the sick person whose faith was an essential catalyst in allowing healing to occur. I am reminded of words written by a woman suffering with lupus, who pondered the mystery of the relationship between faith and healing. “We can encourage healing: help create an environment for it. But we cannot do it. Yet we are an indispensable part of the process. This is all very confusing. I don’t know how to make sense of all this. Perhaps this is where faith comes in. It carries me through that which I do not understand. It also assures me that even if I don’t do the right thing or if I am not doing it in the right way, healing is still possible. This is grace. And I can’t help but believe that somehow seeking or striving counts for something. For what, I don’t know, but I do believe it matters”. In this healing story the leper plays an important role in his own healing. He shows a lot of boldness and courage to approach Jesus in the first place. After all, as an unclean person he is violating the law by approaching the “clean”. In this story Christ and the leper must participate in the miracle of healing. How different this can be from the experience that many of us have of health care. With nurses and doctors attending to impossible case loads, and with HMO’s demanding that a higher number of patients be treated each day, it is all too easy for the patient to feel treated like an assembly line object with a set of bio-medical symptoms rather than as a whole person with body, mind, and soul. But the most effective healing happens when a patient is empowered to be an active participant in the healing process. I sometimes want to remind members of the congregation who are recovering from sickness that healing oneself can be a full time vocation that demands all the physical and spiritual resources of the whole person.

The healing of the leper does not end with his body being cleansed of leprosy or with his sense of self made whole. The healing that Jesus brings about goes deeper. The deeper healing is that of the leper restored as a member of community. To understand why Jesus healing miracles were so controversial and caused such conflict with the authorities, we should remember the way that the sick were treated by his society. The leper was stigmatized by his disease and shunned by his community. In the case of the leper, his sense of being a self in relationship to others was as sick and broken as his body. As with the leper in Jesus day, we can see how the sick continue to be stigmatized. With the AIDS epidemic, the illness of addiction, and the whole spectrum of mental health issues, our society still often blames people for their sickness. I believe that Jesus touched the leper and became unclean in the eyes of his society in order to be in loving solidarity with the leper and with everyone deemed unclean by his society. To those around him, caught up in the legalistic purity codes of that time and place, Jesus became unclean by touching the leper. To those with eyes of faith, Jesus demonstrated that the leper was no longer unclean, no longer a non-person, no longer excluded from community. I believe that Jesus chose to touch the leper in order to bring about the deeper healing of restoring him to community.

Remember that question we had about whether vs. 41 was best translated as “Jesus moved by pity” or “Jesus moved by anger”. I am quite sure that both interpretations have a measure of truth. Jesus was moved with compassion for the suffering of the leper. He was also moved with anger at the health care institution of his day, and its power and
authority to designate someone unclean, unhealthy and there by excluded from community. Jesus was "moved with anger" that the synagogue would exploit the situation of a sick person by requiring a fee, the price of a sacrifice to be deemed clean. In Jesus’ day and in ours, cost of being readmitted to healthy community is increasingly an unreachable goal for the poor. But it is not just the working poor but more and more middle class folk who are being denied access to health care. In today’s world, the sick continue to be marginalized from the community and its resources for healing. A breast cancer survivor is told by her HMO that they will not cover the treatment recommended by her doctor. With the skyrocketing prices for prescription drugs, some of our elderly must choose between food and medicine. There is an ambiguity in vs. 41 that I don’t believe we can resolve, nor should we try. After all, compassion and anger sometimes both spring from the same source within the human heart. I believe Christ is moved with compassion for all those in need of healing who suffer stigmatization or marginalization. And Christ is moved with anger at communities and their institutions that bring this alienation about.

The body of the leper is healed; his self is made whole, his identity as a member of community is restored. But Christ’s healing of the leper goes even further. The healed person is commissioned to work for the healing of his society. With vs. 43, the Gospel reading takes a peculiar twist. Jesus sternly warns the healed man by saying: “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”. What do we make of this? Was Jesus simply behaving as a good Jew and acting in accordance with the Torah, like a good Presbyterian doing everything “decently and in order”? Or is there something more going on here? I am now convinced that Jesus sent the healed person to the synagogue not as proper religious protocol but to announce to the authorities that their monopoly on health care was no more. The leper embodied a “testimony” to the synagogue that their power to decide who was clean and unclean had been nullified. The healed man is a living testimony that Jesus has overturned the health care establishment of his day to make it more inclusive. God incarnate in Christ Jesus was, is working for the healing of all who seek it. God in Christ is working not only for the healing of individuals and families but for the healing of our communities and for our health care institutions.

What might this Gospel text have to say to us in midst of the health care crisis that we are living through? I did not have to live in Elkin very long to understand how much pride this community feels about our local hospital. The ministerial association meets every month over at the hospital and we often have conversations with staff including the new CEO Paul Hammes. I am deeply grateful for the quality of service that they are seeking to provide this town and this region. Woody Faulk and I recently requested a meeting with Paul Hammes the new CEO who is really providing great leadership for HC. In that meeting we told him that we knew that the policy decision by our statehouse not to accept federal funding to expand Medicaid has meant that approximately 500,000 North Carolinians have no recourse for health care. But in this conversation with Paul Hammes the CEO of Hugh Chatham hospital it became clearer that the refusal to expand Medicaid is having a profound impact on our local hospital. HC like any responsible hospital will never turn away some in dire need of care. But every uninsured person who comes to the
hospital through the ER is utilizing limited resources. HC is losing millions of dollars a year. And this internal bleeding could be addressed in large part by policy decisions in Raleigh to accept Medicaid expansion.

Today more and more people of faith are realizing that we must not only work for the healing of individuals. We must work for the healing of our health care institutions. As the leper went to the synagogue to offer his healing as a testimony, so must people of faith and good will go to the state house and to other institutions responsible for public health to testify that they will no longer control who gets healed and who doesn’t. The people of North Carolina are saying loud and clear: “If you choose, you can heal me!” May our state policy makers respond with Christ by saying, “We do choose, be healed”. “But the leper went out and began to talk freely about his healing and to spread the good news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country; and people came to him from every corner.” Do we have the daring faith of the leper to come before the living Christ bringing our wounds and our broken places crying out “If you choose, you can heal me!” Christ responds to each of us “I do choose. Be made well. I do choose be made whole. I do choose, be restored to community. And as healed followers of the Risen Christ, may we proclaim the good news that God is working for the healing of the world. Thanks be to God.