

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Feb. 10-11,  
2018

We are blessed with a very powerful message in today's readings. However, the setting and details, which are around the condition of leprosy, are quite unusual to our experience today so a little background is needed to fully understand the message.

In the first reading today from the Book of Leviticus we hear how leprosy was treated in ancient Jewish times.

First of all, in that time and even yet in Jesus' day, the term leprosy was used to refer to any number of severe skin disorders including actual leprosy. Leprosy in those ancient times was basically incurable and practically speaking a death sentence.

Anyone displaying a noticeable skin disorder was required to be examined by a priest. When the disease was verified, a total separation from human society was required lest the disease spread to the whole community. Leper thus had to live totally apart from the people, and if they had to pass through an area where people were they had to announce their presence and declare themselves to be unclean. They could not work, they could not visit even their families, and worst of all, they were barred from entering the temple or a synagogue and thus from participating in any of the religious rituals.

When we think of the times in which our gospel was written, it hard to imagine anyone more hopeless than a leper. In curing the leper Jesus is reaching out the most outcast persons of society.

The message is clear. Jesus is the Savior of all people. This is an important focus of Mark's gospel. The first of the four gospels to be

written, it was intended for a wide audience. This includes Jews and Gentiles, men and women, the old and the young, the rich and the poor. As the leper story tells us, Jesus is the redeemer of all, even those whom society ignores and considers worthless. All in the human family are God's children and deserve dignity and respect.

By approaching Jesus, this leper makes a bold move. Not only does he break the Law but he also risks rejection. In reverence he kneels before Jesus, and his plea, "if you wish – you can make me clean" shows his complete confidence in Jesus' power. His request not to be healed, but to be "made clean" shows that his deepest desire is to be free to once again participate in the religious ceremonies of his people.

At the sight of this poor man, Jesus is moved with pity and as the bystanders surely looked on in shock, Jesus stretches out his hand and touches him. However, Jesus is not defiled by the leprosy; instead his touch and his word instantly make the man clean. (cf – last week – Jesus does not throw the man with the demon out of the synagogue but rather throws the demon out of the man.) The power of Jesus' cleanness and holiness is able to remove defilement from all those who approach him in faith.

Jesus tells the man not to tell anyone, but he cannot help but tell everyone what Jesus has done for him.

As a result, it becomes impossible for Jesus to enter towns openly. He has taken on himself, the leper's previous status. The healed man is free to enter into human society again, but Jesus must now remain outside in deserted places to avoid being mobbed by crowds seeking to benefit from his miraculous powers. He has healed the man of leprosy at a cost to himself, just as later in the gospel he

will take on the status of Barabus the condemned criminal, while Barabbus will be set free.

We hear a similar message from Paul in his letter to the Corinthians today. In that new Christian community there were many tensions between the former Jews and the strict religious laws and customs they had been raised up in and the customs of the Greeks. Paul in response, urges them to respect and to reach out to all, “whether Jew or Greek or the church of God.” If Jesus brought them together then no law or custom was so serious as to keep them apart. Paul clearly affirms that this universal concern for all people is the focus of his ministry and that in this he is following the example of Christ. “Be imitators of me, he says, as I am of Christ.” We might ask ourselves -- who has been an important model of Christian life for us?

The overall lesson again is that we must constantly opt to serve our brothers and sisters in need. Sometimes social and economic and spiritual or moral problems seem to big or complex for us to handle. Many times it is just plain easier to ignore the problem and settle for inaction. Fear and judgement still lead us to withdraw ourselves from contact with those who need us most – the sick, the poor, the stranger, or the person who seems morally lost.

Jesus however, shows us the best response – “I do will it - be made clean.”

Today is the World Day of the Sick, observed each year on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. Today we pray for all who are ill, but also for those afflicted with conditions that are difficult to be around. We pray for the grace to be able to stand with them and walk with them no matter their condition. As Jesus showed his disciples and followers –

God does not shun anyone or shut anyone out. Let us see that while we may not be able to heal the sick, our standing with them can make them “clean.” We declare others “clean” when we invite them into our circle of concern. *(Share briefly a situation where I “befriended” a person to strengthen their status when they were without support and being pushed around in an unjust situation.)*

In today’s gospel story, leprosy can be viewed a metaphor or symbol of brokenness. Can we recognize that we as well as our society suffer from various kinds of brokenness? Might we also kneel before Jesus asking for healing?

Although leprosy has basically been wiped out in developed nations, the loneliness and stigma around various physical or interior afflictions or labels such as mental illness or criminal records is as widespread as ever. The uncleanness of sin often causes an even deeper shame that makes persons hesitant even to turn to God.

As we enter this week into the season of Lent – a time of purification of our union with God, may the boldness of the man’s approach to Jesus in the Gospel and his rich reward be ours. Just as he was richly rewarded, so is the prayer of all who approach him with confidence in his cleansing power, especially through the sacrament of reconciliation.

Jesus is not turned off, scandalized or contaminated by any human defilement or sin. He willingly removes it by the power of his own holiness, restoring our communion with others and making us fully qualified and worthy to enter also into God’s presence.

May we not hold back in this Lent from receiving Jesus’ healing ourselves and let us not hold back either from inviting all to come and receive the healing of Jesus. (Cf. – today’s Psalm 32:1-11)