

WHO ARE TODAY'S LEPERS?

Sunday's readings are an evolution of society's treatment of lepers. In the first reading, "If the man is leprous and unclean, the priest shall declare him unclean by reason of the sore on his head." The unclean man must then publicly declare himself unclean and live apart from others.

The leper was unclean. Under Jewish law, leprosy was also a manifestation of one's sinful nature. Leprosy was perceived to be God's punishment for one's sins.

Even today, some blamed divine retribution for Hurricane Katrina (New Orleans), Earthquakes in Haiti, Superstorm Sandy (New York, D.C., etc.) and the Las Vegas shootings. But Jesus, the New Covenant, challenged that thinking 2000 years ago, as we hear in Sunday's Gospel reading.



Jesus was "moved with pity" at the leper. He felt something: COMPASSION. How often do I feel nothing?

Jesus then touched the leper. He could have instinctively hidden behind Jewish custom and laws in which he was raised, smothered his feelings, and hid his hands under his tunic. Yet Jesus was moved to touch the leper, touch being the simplest and surest sign of respect and empathy.

Jesus publicly declared his willingness to heal the leper. Although a sign of the new covenant, as a good Jew Jesus could have healed the man with a passing touch or a nod. If "they'll know we are Christians by our love," then a secret sign is an insufficient expression of Christian witness. Be bold in your love for your faith; bold beyond words but in deeds.

Bold in deed, Jesus did the best that he could do, which in this case was to heal the leper. God never asks more of us than we can handle. God never asks us to do better than our best. However, as we read in the parable of the talents, we are expected to do something (MT 25: 14-30).

Every society has its lepers, a class of citizens that has been disregarded, discriminated against, and eventually marginalized from the body politic. Because of prejudice, scapegoating, or ignorance, they have been relegated to the margins.

Father Greg Boyle wrote of creating a community of solidarity, which becomes a circle of compassion. "Then we imagine no one standing outside of that circle, moving ourselves closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased. We stand there with those whose dignity has been denied. We locate ourselves with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless. ...We situate ourselves right next to the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away" (*Tattoos on the Heart*).

Jesus erased the margins that kept the lepers apart until he compassionately touched the leper and openly healed him.

Who are today's lepers? What is God calling you to do?

(Based on the Readings for the Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time)