

February 11, 2018

Lv 13:1-2, 44-46; 1 Cor 10:31-11:1; Mk 1:40-45

There are maybe 180,000 people with Hansen's disease in the world today. Many of the sufferers are left with severe open sores on the face and other parts of the body, and develop deformities of the fingers, toes, and facial features up to and including these parts of the body wasting away and disappearing. Without modern medical treatment (that have only been readily available in the last century), the sores can be festering and smell horribly, and the condition will make the person more deformed year after year. This disease has been known by other names, most notably "Leprosy," and it has been a feared condition throughout human history, causing people to pull back in disgust at the very sight of the infected person - and also isolate them out of sight in leper colonies.

This is not just a physical disease, our first reading tells us that in biblical times once it was diagnosed the person was given the title "unclean" and had to announce his presence by calling out "unclean" as he walked around. He was to *dwell apart, living outside the camp* - no one would want to talk to him, to have him in their store or house, and certainly no one would touch him for the rest of his life. A cure was the only hope of feeling fully human again. Such is the horrible stigma of this disease, both physical and social - imagine the courage it took the leper to come to Jesus considering how shameful and isolated he must have felt.

When the man approaches Jesus he does not say "if you wish you can heal me," he says "*if you wish you can make me clean*." He was looking for more than the removal of a disease, he wanted his status changed from "unclean" to "clean" so he could rejoin his friends and family, so he could be part of society again - what the man sought was deeper than physical cure, he was looking for the removal of the whole condition that kept him separated from the human community and his ability to worship God in the temple. Jesus sees the man's situation, he reaches out and fearlessly touches him and says *I do will it, be made clean* - and in more than one way his status is changed from "unclean" to "clean."

In his responsiveness, Jesus gives an example of how to treat the lonely, the outcast, the unpopular, the smelly or not-so-nice-to-look at. But following this example to care for the needs of the neglected and unwanted is only half the story: Jesus brought more than physical healing and comfort to the man in the story, he brought reconciliation. Whenever Jesus heals, the removal of the external disease points to other healing taking place. Healing for Jesus is always about more than healing the

body. Jesus heals the separation between the person and the community (as he did with the man in the story we heard today), he forgives the sins that distance the person from God (as when he says “your sins are forgiven” when healing many others), and he frees people from their slavery to sin (as he does when he says that the woman healed from a hemorrhage has been freed from her bondage to Satan).

We all have roles to play in Jesus’ continued action of healing our brothers and sisters. Caring for bodily and material needs of others is one vital way to bring healing and comfort, but, the removal of sins (which is part of full healing of the person) requires a direct contact of Jesus. We receive that contact in the Eucharist and with it the removal of minor sin for which we are sorry, however, Jesus has provided another way he can provide healing for the more serious sins and the slavery that results from repeated sin. When he appeared to the Apostles in the upper room after his resurrection Jesus breathed on them and said *receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained*. By this action he empowered these first Bishops and their successors (and the priests they ordain) to be the instrument he works through as Jesus himself forgives sins in the sacrament of reconciliation.

Holding on to serious or repeated sin puts us in a situation like the leper - we can become ashamed, and in hiding our wounds we can become confined to a leper colony of our own making. Slavery to sin is gradual and progressive; it can slowly eat away at our mind and soul, year after year, like leprosy eats away at the body. St. Ambrose saw the connection of this Gospel story to the sacrament of reconciliation, and holds up the leper as a role model when he said: *For everyone should blush at the stains of his life, but [the leper] ... [did not keep] back his confession, he shows his wound, and asks for a remedy, saying, If you will, you can make me clean*. Confession is a way to approach Jesus directly, like the leper did, to lay bare the embarrassing blemishes and wounds that tarnish our dignity, and be assured that our sins are forgiven, and that we are reconciled and made “clean.” Today’s psalm also speaks of the healing effects of this sacrament: *Then I acknowledged my sin to you, my guilt I covered not. I said, “I confess my faults to the Lord,” and you took away the guilt of my sin*. I encourage all of you to note the confession times available at local Catholic churches, or seek out a priest for confession. As we approach Lent, consider exploring the healing effects of this sacrament on a more regular basis - and also to move our hearts to treat others we encounter less like “lepers.” Remember, Jesus loves us no matter what has happened, and he wants to heal us so we can experience the freedom of moving beyond sin and hurt, and to a new life of peace and reconciliation.