

February 14, 2021

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

Did you ever feel unclean? I don't just mean because you need a shower - I mean did you ever look at yourself and realize that you were not where you wanted to be, you were not as good as you wanted to be, you were not worthy. Have you ever seen faults and been disappointed in yourself, or sense that others were rejecting you. When we feel this way we can do many different things. The one that I find becoming more common is to just decide we're OK. We blame others for our perceived shortcomings, we blame the world for not being laid out correctly, we blame God for not doing things right. But there really is something unsatisfying in proclaiming ourselves clean ... especially when somewhere deep down we don't really believe it. Jesus provides us a better and more powerful way.

To understand what Jesus does, we have to look at what the leper asks of Jesus in the Gospel. This man has a terrible illness that likely was going to slowly lead to his death. There was the disease itself, and then there was the larger picture. In the world of the ancient Jews, such an illness would make someone "unclean." This legal designation is not about hygiene, it is a declaration made by law for various reasons. When someone was "unclean" they could not associate with others, they had to remain separate, and they were barred from coming near the presence of God in the temple. They were separated from humans and also from God. They could only become part of the community fully again - they could only approach God without barrier - when they were legally designated "clean." It would be silly for the person to say - "OK, I've decided that I am clean, so now I'll be coming over for dinner - and see you at the Temple"! There had to be an official process of being declared clean; God makes things clean, but to say it has happened has always needed something beyond the individual. The leper knows this - he does not ask Jesus to be healed ... he says *if you wish you can make me clean.*

God presents us in scripture the leper and his encounter with Jesus to give us a model for what cleansing happens through Jesus. When we sin we become "unclean" by God's law. Whether we realize it or not, sin places a barrier between us and others. The results of our sinfulness distance ourselves from family, friends, and community. Sin distances us from God as well. Just like the leper didn't make the rules about what makes someone clean or unclean (God did that at length in the book of Leviticus), we don't simply get to decide what makes us clean or unclean with respect to God. The all good, all Holy, all clean God cannot be joined to the unclean - because he can have nothing unclean

within Him - and God is the one that tells us what is clean and unclean. This tendency to believe that we make the rules about being clean, this tendency to think that just because I say that I've decided that I am "clean" it makes it so - does not fit with what God has revealed from the earliest days.

The leper is correct in what he wants the most, not necessarily the end to his physical illness, but an end to being unclean, and end to being separated from God and others at a deeper level. Our sin also places a barrier between us and others and needs Jesus' intervention. Look at what Jesus does in the Gospel. The man approaches Jesus with true humility, not telling him that they all got it wrong when they declared him unclean, not telling him what to do, not trying to make a case that he is really a "good person" so this is all unfair. He simply speaks the truth - Jesus is the one who can make him clean.

However, there is another important point that comes up here. Although Jesus will do the healing, the man will not be designated "clean" and be allowed to approach God in the temple until he goes to the priests for an official certification of that cleanliness. Jesus is the one who send him there. He is showing that it is not me and Jesus alone in being made clean - Jesus involves the church. In fact, Jesus tells the Apostles, the first Bishops, *If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.* Jesus shows by what he does with the Apostles his continued desire to use human priests to certify being made clean and right with God. The Apostles have passed down this commission to their successors (as first was seen in the Acts of the Apostles) and they share this with the priests they ordain. Now when you go to confession you both approach Jesus present in the priest, and also the official representative of the Church to certify the cleansing. It's a two-for-one deal. Humbly approaching and seeking to be made clean you come into the presence of Jesus to confess, and then receive the official assurance that you are clean.

God is genius in doing this. Since Jesus is present in the members of his Church, He - the one true priest - can be present in the human priest and can make you clean again. Since the human priest is also a human being, you get the benefit of being able to receive spiritual advice, and also profit from the psychological helps to conversion that happen when you admit your faults to another. When the priest pronounces the absolution, Jesus' plan that forgiveness will be spoken through the mouths of the ones he has designated to do this happens. Like the leper we cannot just go to Jesus and declare ourselves clean, we have to do as Jesus set it up, and receive that certification of forgiveness through the exercise the gift given to the Apostles. This is truly being made clean: actually clean, officially clean, and confidently made right with God. Blessed be the God who heals us and makes us clean again in Christ.