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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
February 14, 2021 Streaming Mass
6th Sunday of Year B Lev. 13:1-2, 44-46, Mark 1: 40-45

Let me begin with a question. We see where we find Jesus in today's gospel, but where do we find Jesus in today's world? After locating Jesus in the context of His day, then it will be easier to find Him in our day. We read that Jesus is outside the town in a "deserted place," and there He encounters a leper. In the book of Leviticus we read that the leper "shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp." The leper is seen as the ultimate outsider, living on the margins of society. He is the symbol of those whom no one can help, of those who are without hope. The leper seems to have internalized the judgment of the rabbis that he is unclean, untouchable, unfit for ordinary human interaction. His affliction was viewed by the people of the time as a punishment from God. He bears the marks of shame in his body; more deeply, more importantly, he bears those marks on his soul, on his psyche. In his very being, he sees himself as "damaged goods." The deeper pain of leprosy, more than the physical effects of the disease, is the growing realization that no one cares about him.

The mind of the leper is revealed in how he addresses Jesus. He has heard of Jesus' power to heal, but more importantly he has heard that Jesus cares about those whom no one else cares about. Jesus includes the excluded. The reputation of Jesus emboldens the leper to step forward. He hesitates in making his request, lest Jesus not be disposed to help him. All he can do is utter a cry for help, "Jesus, if you wish, you can make me clean." Jesus' compassion for this isolated human being moves Him to reach out and touch the leper, symbolically welcoming him back into the circle of human community. Jesus restores the leper to his family, friends and neighbors, but ironically Jesus is now the one who cannot enter the town openly. Having touched the leper, now Jesus is considered "unclean." You probably are familiar with the saying, "No good deed goes unpunished." The cleansed leper can now enter the town, but the One who cleansed him must keep His distance.

Now let's move to more modern times. I recently came across the story of a young woman, named Ruth Coker Burks, who with no medical training or resources looked after ostracized AIDS patients back in the 80s. Here is how her journey began. One day she was visiting a friend in a hospital and noticed a door covered in red tarpaulin, with the word "biohazard" stamped across it. She watched the nurses draw straws, or toothpicks, to decide who would enter the room; then she watched them all walk away. At that moment she decided that she would go into that room. The man in the room was so thin and pale that he could hardly be seen against the bed sheets.

She asked what she could do to help and he answered that he wanted his mother. She thought she could do that easily enough. When she relayed the message to the nurses, they told her, "He has the 'gay cancer.' His mama's not coming. No one's coming." They tossed the family's phone number across the desk, but when Coker Burks called, the mother hung up on her, saying her son was dead to her the moment he was gay. She went back into the room, sat down beside the man, she took his hand, unsure what to tell him. He looked up at her and said, "Oh, mama, I knew you'd come." She thought to herself, "OK, then I'm your mother." She said to him, "Honey, I'm here and I won't leave you." She sat with him for 13 hours—the time it took for him to die.

Over the next decade Coker Burks was with many others, as they took their last breath. With little support and no remuneration, she befriended, fed, tested and supplied medicine to hundreds of sick men and women. How did things work out for her? As I said before, "No good deed goes unpunished." She was ostracized by her local community, as if she were "contagious." Her church ejected her from its finance committee. Neighbor children stopped inviting her daughter to their parties. The KKK twice burned a cross on her lawn. But she had no regrets. She says she "was just trying to do what was right.

In our day, too, we have ways of distancing the sick from those who consider themselves healthy. All too often, those who suffer from cancer, AIDS, Alzheimer's, mental illness are not required to ring the bell warning the supposedly "healthy" of their approach. Still, they may be subjected to the same techniques of silencing, shaming and judging in an attempt to keep them in their place—at a distance, apart, at the periphery. One of the most depressing aspects of a serious illness can be the sense of isolation it produces. That sense of isolation may originate with the individual who feels ashamed, weak, not understood, even shunned. Or, it may begin with the people with whom he or she was accustomed to associate with. These erstwhile friends may find the sick person to be someone with whom they now find it uncomfortable to be around; they may have less time for that individual; they may even begin to avoid him or her. And just as in the time of Jesus when leprosy was seen as more than a physical disease, but was perceived as evidence of God's judgment upon the sinner, there are some even today who are quicker to blame the sick for their condition than they are to show any compassion--it's their fault that they are sick.

The leper in today's Gospels is the epitome of the one who is doomed to suffer in isolation. And Jesus is the one who not only cures him of his disease, but reconnects him to his family, friends and community, and more importantly restores him to

himself, removing all sense of shame, judgment and self-incrimination. The leper no longer has to bear the burden of a lack of self-worth that his disease has imposed upon him. Jesus gives back to the leper his very life.

Now, for the question, "Where is Jesus found in today's world?" Jesus is found in the "deserted places" of our society; the places where the presumably healthy do not want to go; the places where the sick have to suffer on their own. Our faith tells us that God took on our human flesh in the person of Jesus. God takes on all the messiness of human existence. We see in Jesus His desire to reach out, to touch, to connect with all human beings, enabling them to connect with each other. Jesus shows compassion. And what is compassion? Simply the awareness of sharing a common world that drives us to action. We do not recoil, we reach out. So, even if we are not physicians, even if we cannot cure the disease or illness, our task as disciples of Jesus is to continue His healing work: to help make people whole; to ensure that those who are sick need not suffer in isolation; to enable them to connect with the whole human family. In a few minutes we will sing, "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul." Any one of us can be that soothing, healing balm when we do for someone who is cut-off and suffering what Jesus does in today's Gospel.