

[77] Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: *Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46 / Psalm 32 / 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 / Mark 1:40-45*

The Levitical law about lepers was intended to protect the community from contagion; however, the individual sufferer was both physically ostracized and stigmatized as one who was punished by God. The leper lost everything: his place in the community, his job, his family, etc. Indeed, failure to abide by the regulations about proximity could result in his execution. By appearance and by proclamation, "Unclean, unclean!" he announced his coming into the local vicinity. Sometimes the healthy villagers or families had locations where food was left for the afflicted. Later, those suffering from leprosy would also ring a bell, particularly if they had trouble speaking. Just as the Jewish priest passed sentence for the expulsion, if cleansed a similar process of washing and examination might allow a (former) leper to return to his family and community. Lepers often traveled alone although some gathered for companionship or formed their own colonies. Most were intensely afraid of any association with them.

The situation with leprosy reminds me of what was encountered by those afflicted with AIDs in the early 1980's. As a priest working at a hospice in Washington, DC, I quickly saw the cancer patients outnumbered by those dying from AIDs. There were few drugs to treat it back then and the disease quickly killed its victims. Many of the patients I visited were young men in their 20's. Certain rigid fundamentalists asserted that it was God's condemnation upon the homosexual community. Even children and others who contracted the disease through blood transfusions were vilified and segregated. The virus was found in all the fluids of the body, even sweat and tears. I recall one young man who wept when I anointed him with the holy oil. Everyone who approached him was dressed up like an astronaut and wore rubber gloves. Much to the chagrin of the staff I insisted on applying the oil with my bare hand. When I asked the poor man why he cried, he responded, "Father, everyone is afraid to come near me. You are the first person to actually touch me with his bare hand in over a year." I was summoned to another dying patient by his parents. As I approached the door, a young man stood before me and angrily shouted, "I am George and I am his boyfriend! What do you think about that? He was angry and wanted a fight. I was not going to give it to him. I replied, "My name is Father Joe and I am so sorry about the situation. I have come to bring the mercy and healing of Jesus, not to debate." I prayed with him and the poor man's parents. I gave him the Last Rights. Upset at the situation and anger at the Church seemed to disappear. This was the real face of the Church. Jesus did not put conditions on his love. Our Lord said that he came not for the righteous but for sinners. He did not shy away from others but deliberately went out to the poor, the sick, the sinners and the marginalized. How could I or any priest do any differently? St. Paul said in the second reading today, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." This was the manner in which we bring salvation to others. When family and friends learned of my hospice

ministry, I was assigned my own plate, fork, spoon and a cup (with my name on it). Because of my ministerial association with modern-day lepers, many became afraid to immediately relate with me. Fortunately, such a hysterical response has long since subsided; but it is nothing that I will ever forget. I took comfort from the Scriptures, knowing that our Lord was condemned and spurned because of his outreach to God's alienated people.

The responsorial exhorts, "Blessed is he whose fault is taken away, whose sin is covered... 'I confess my faults to the LORD.' We are all sick. We are all sinners. Nevertheless, we often look down upon others as less or as more afflicted than ourselves. Believers are always tempted to be like the self-righteous Pharisee, seeking to justify ourselves as better than or at least not as sinful as someone else. But sin is sin, no matter if great or small. We are all broken and need healing. The Church, like Christ, does not close her doors to those afflicted by sin. Yes, we have strong views about right and wrong. We should never compromise our moral truths. But likewise, we should appreciate that we have all fallen short. We live in a messy world. We invite God's grace to forgive and to transform us. This process begins in the here-and-now but for some it will not be complete until the purification in the life to come. As vehicles or prophets of grace, we need to open the doors of the faith to all who are searching for meaning and reconciliation with God. This is a hallmark of Pope Francis' notion of accompaniment.

The leper in the Gospel takes a terrible chance, as does our Lord. He approaches Jesus and begs to be healed. This "approach" itself is forbidden by their law. Our Lord is not worried about such things. We read, "Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, 'I do will it. Be made clean.'" The Scriptures are deliberate here. Our Lord "touched" the untouchable leper. He made himself unclean in the sight of the religious leadership. This is a whole magnitude more serious than eating and drinking with tax collectors. Even the religious leadership would partake of Matthew's food and hospitality, although without sitting at the same table with him and other condemned sinners. The leper was absolutely off limits. Jesus tells the man to show himself to the Jewish priest. This is the same process we read about in the first reading. This man is not merely physically healed, but this act of mercy restores him socially to his community and family. It is no wonder that he could not keep secret about this great blessing in his life. However, word of the event causes the crowds to balloon. Such intervention would also further harden the hearts of those who oppose Jesus. They are more concerned about rules and their standing in the Jewish community than about the plight of the poor and hurting.

- Are there people with whom we refuse to associate?
- Have we ever felt abandoned or rejected?
- Are we ever afraid to become involved or to witness Christ to others?
- Have we belittled others through stereotypes and bigotry?