

Kissing the Leper

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

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It is easy to hate a group of people if we never encounter them personally- those on the other side of the world, those in a different social class, those in a different political party, those from a different culture. Even if hate is too strong a word, we at least try to keep them as far away from us as possible.

In today's scripture readings, we hear about another specific group of people that was hated and purposely kept at a distance: those with leprosy. In the Old Testament story from today, those with leprosy were expected to shout 'unclean, unclean' about themselves whenever others approached them. This was because leprosy was contagious and was a life sentence to physical sores, deformity, and ultimately death. This directive came not from the health directors, but from the priests! In New Testament times, leprosy continued to be a social stigma. In today's Gospel, a person affected with leprosy begged Jesus to heal him. He desperately wanted to be made clean. Unlike those who hated people with leprosy or actively avoided them, Jesus allowed him to approach and touched him. Mindful of the Old Testament practice of the priests declaring someone clean or unclean, Jesus instructed him to go show himself to the priests. The man was so glad to be healed that instead he went to tell everyone about his healing.

Throughout the centuries well up into modern times, leprosy has remained a social problem and a group to be hated and avoided. Two saints in our Church history that have been profoundly impacted by

encountering lepers face to face are St. Francis of Assisi and St. Damien of Molokai.

Francis wasn't born a saint. He grew up in the security of a wealthy family in Assisi and started off like many of his peers. As his first biographer wrote, "so greatly loathsome was the sight of lepers to him at one time, he used to say, that, in the days of his vanity, he would look at their houses only from a distance of two miles and he would hold his nostrils with his hands." One day, things changed for Francis. Instead of ignoring a leper in his way, he went up to him and kissed his hand. From that day on, Francis no longer hated the lepers. He would go on to love the poor and the least of humanity.

Damien was a Belgian missionary priest born in 1840. Of all the missionary assignments offered, he chose to go serve the people living on a secluded island in Hawaii. The island of Molokai housed a government mandated isolation place for those with leprosy. Knowing that he may never be able to leave the island once he arrived due to becoming contaminated with the disease himself, his life took a saintly turn. Not only was he their priest, he was also was their emotional and physical support. He ate with them and helped them build schools, churches, roads, and hospitals. When the time came, he prayed with the dying, made their coffins, and dug their graves. The lepers taught him how to love the world's forgotten. After 11 years, he contracted the disease himself and died a few years later.

A human connection begins whenever we personally encounter someone from another group that we normally do not associate with. Who are some of the faceless groups that I hate, or at least ignore? Do I make an effort to get to know those who aren't like me?

There is a key qualification, however. We must encounter others with a sense of openness. Let us pray that through the intercessions of Sts. Francis and Damien, we may not be afraid to kiss the leper.