

Fr. Curtis Miller February 13-14, 2021 Homily for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

For centuries, leprosy was one of the most feared diseases, causing your body to literally fall apart around you. Fearing (falsely) that leprosy was highly contagious, people afflicted with this disease were isolated from their families and communities. These poor people had to live alone, wear disheveled clothing, and cry out, “Unclean, unclean,” to warn people to stay away. It was a lonely and humiliating life.

That’s why the story from today’s Gospel reading is so surprising. Jesus could have just said a word or waved His hand to heal the leper, but instead, Jesus chose to touch him, to heal not just his body, but also his loneliness and isolation.

In those days, if anyone touched a leper, they would be considered unclean themselves. Yet Jesus fearlessly reaches out to touch this poor sufferer. Not only is Jesus not made unclean, *He* makes the leper clean, too. This showed that Jesus has divine power because He is the Son of God.

Today, leprosy (or Hansen’s disease as it is now known) is not such a feared disease. But this story of Jesus healing the leper can help us reflect upon a couple important questions for ourselves. First, in what way do I need healing from God? Second, who is the leper in my life whom I’m afraid to reach out to, but who needs my help? In God’s mysterious wisdom, it is often by reaching out to help this very person that we receive the healing we need ourselves.

To illustrate this point, let’s consider the story of Brother Joseph Dutton. I’ve mentioned him in homilies before, but his story bears repeating. A native of Stowe, Vermont, he served in the Civil War, fulfilling the unenviable task of reinterring the bodies of soldiers, hastily buried on battlefields. Perhaps hoping to put such horrors behind him, Dutton got married, but his wife was unfaithful and soon abandoned him. It’s little wonder that he spent much of the next decade as an alcoholic.

In 1876, with the help of some Catholic friends, he finally quit drinking. Attracted by their faith, he converted to Catholicism. He even spent several months in a monastery, hoping to become a monk, but it didn’t work out.

Then, by chance, or by God’s providence, Dutton read a newspaper article about the work of Father Damien, serving the lepers confined to a colony on the remote Hawaiian island of Molokai. At last, Dutton knew that he had discovered what God wanted him to do with his life. He left everything behind to begin a new life, dedicated completely to God through serving the sick on Molokai. There, he became known as Brother Joseph. He faithfully assisted Father Damien, changing bandages and tending the sores of the afflicted, building houses and other buildings, even coaching baseball teams, and sadly burying the many who died. This soon included Father Damien himself,

who contacted the disease and soon died of it. Even though he knew that the same terrible fate could await him, Brother Joseph chose to stay and continue Father Damien's work. He would serve there for over forty years, the rest of his life, never catching the disease. Photos of Brother Joseph show him with a joyful smile, even amid such suffering and the personal risk to his health. Before, his life had been falling apart, but once he reached out to serve people in need, God blessed Brother Joseph's life with meaning and joy. I believe that Brother Joseph will one day become the first Vermonter canonized as a saint.

You and I probably aren't called to go serve in a literal leper colony, but we should look at the people around us to see how we could help them, people in our families and communities. Let us reach out to serve them, because by doing so, we might receive from God the very healing we need in our own lives.