

February 14, 2021

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Sixth Sunday of the Year

Today is a special Sunday for several reasons. Besides being the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (and the last Sunday in “Ordinary Time” until mid-June, since the 6-week Lenten Season is about to begin, which leads right into the 7-week Easter Season and several weeks after that of special Solemn Feasts), today is also designated as “World Marriage Day”. On this weekend every year, the Church holds up for us the beautiful Vocation of Marriage, so that the whole Community can support with our prayers, and thank those of you who are married for the great witness of your lives, as you try to love your spouses (and families) with the Love of Christ Himself; but also for the purpose of encouraging our young people to consider the Sacrament of Marriage as the Vocation through which God might be calling you to live your lives

Today is also special because our Sixth Sunday of the Year happens to fall on “Valentine’s Day”, which this year, fortunately comes BEFORE Ash Wednesday, so everyone can still enjoy your gifts of chocolates and other sweet delights, just in case you intend to give up any of those delicacies for Lent. So Happy World Marriage Day, and Happy Valentines’ Day to everyone---to all those people in our lives whom we love and who accompany us along our life journey.

As “World Marriage Day” and Valentine’s Day focus our attention on those in our lives who love us, the Scripture Readings we’ve just listened to for this Sixth Sunday of the Year focus our attention on God’s unconditional Love for us, His People, and the ways in which His Word always speaks to our hearts, and encourages us in the ways we choose to live in union with His Word!

As we know, Jesus IS the Word of God in the Flesh; He Who came to make His dwelling among us, and to seek out those who were Lost. There’s no more powerful demonstration of that than this Gospel passage we just heard. We can’t even begin to imagine, the fear that people felt in the face of Leprosy. It was a terribly dreaded disease for which at the time, there was no cure. The prevailing wisdom at that time was, since there was no known way to treat the disease because it was so contagious, the only recourse was to do whatever it would take to protect the healthy members of the community by banishing the leper---to literally “excommunicate” that poor person to live apart from everyone else---and in that “banished” state, they were destined to live a life of isolation and exclusion. It was awful! It was truly a “living death”.

Today's First Reading from the Book of Leviticus gave us the origin of that practice and the official steps that were required by Moses himself. If a person appeared to have leprosy, they had to be brought to the priest; it was he who had to declare the person "unclean" and to impose the "excommunication" to live apart from his/her family and friends forever, or at least until there was some kind of cure. And what was worse, that person was required to make sure that no "healthy" or "clean" person ever accidentally came upon him/her by having to go through the indignity of identifying himself as "Unclean" to anyone who might inadvertently come near.

And so, to hear in today's Gospel that a person with leprosy came running up to Jesus who was surrounded by His followers would have been an absolute shock! You can almost hear the crowds "Gasping", and see them scurrying away in fear for their own health and well-being. The person with leprosy had obviously heard about Jesus as "Someone Special", knelt down at His feet, and boldly said: "*If You wish, You can make me clean!*" But that was nothing compared to what happened next. Instead of keeping His distance, or running away, Jesus was "*moved with pity*" (St. Mark tells us) and He "*stretched out His hand and touched him.*" And then Jesus said: "*I do will it. Be made clean.*" Then Jesus told the healed man to go to the priest. Since he had been "excommunicated" by the priest, it was up to the priest to formally declare him "healed" and to "re-instate" the man back into the life of the community.

When we think about it, Jesus actually performed two miracles at the same time: 1) the first was obvious---the man was healed from leprosy; but the 2nd)---was a little harder to see: that man was literally given back his life; he had been consigned to a "living death". Jesus' healing gave him back his life. He could again participate in human interactions; he once more had human dignity because, as the Mosaic Law dictated, he no longer had to " *dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp*".

It seems to me that these Scripture Readings dealing with Leprosy, that we know better today as "Hansen's Disease", have never been more understandable to us than in these days when the dreaded Coronavirus has caused the entire human race to live with great fear and anxiety for nearly a whole year. More than two million people have died throughout the world; in our country alone, we are approaching 500,000 who have died. Thanks be to God the Vaccines have been developed in "break-neck speed" and are currently being distributed; that makes everyone breathe a little easier. We have come to know first-hand what it's like to live in fear of human contact, when, until this awful Virus, human touch and interaction was the most natural and positive action for all human beings. We miss terribly being able to freely and

lovingly gather with our community of faith, and we miss the social interaction with our friends. We all know what “isolation” is because of restrictions imposed of where we can go and what we can do. We all have a much clearer insight into what that poor person suffering from leprosy must have felt. So when He saw Jesus, we can also understand what made him disregard the religious prohibitions and “social-distancing protocols” because he saw Jesus as the One Who could help him. Jesus was his “vaccine”, and the One Who could be the “cure” he desperately needed.

Some diseases, like leprosy, are much easier to detect than others, like the ones that come from microscopic viruses. And whether it was in the days of Moses and in the time of Jesus, or whether it’s in our modern 21st century with all kinds of medical advancements, we do the best we can with our current knowledge. But what about the unseen, spiritual maladies that can be just as “contagious”, the ones which infect our heart; what about the spiritual virus of sin which enters into our souls, and can poison our good judgments and impacts the actions of our lives. Just as it’s so important for us to be vigilant about our physical health and well-being, so too we should be mindful of what the status of our spiritual health is.

It was a life-saving decision that the man in the Gospel made to go running up to Jesus with his request: *“If you wish, you can make me clean.”* But, let’s be clear. The only reason why God sent His Son Jesus into the world was to do precisely that---to bring us forgiveness for our sins. There’s never a question “IF” Jesus wishes to make us clean; He gave His life for that purpose.

Actually for most of us, that conversation should be turned around. It’s Jesus Who is the one running to us, in every way imaginable---thru His Word, in the Eucharist, in every aspect of our Faith, through our prayers; Jesus is the One Who is always saying to us: “If you wish, I can make you clean.”----If you allow it----if you come to me----if you are aware enough of what sin in your life is doing to you, then I can heal you---make you clean; give you back a healthy spiritual Life. The question is: do we allow it? Do we really want Jesus to heal us---to free us from that virus of sin that keeps us from being whole/spiritually healthy? Maybe we’re hesitant because we don’t think we’re “sick”; maybe we don’t want to admit our need; maybe we think we’re not important enough. Or maybe we think our sin is too great. If Jesus didn’t let the dreaded disease of leprosy keep Him from reaching out to the man in his need, there is nothing so bad in any of our lives that would ever keep Jesus from doing the same to us---reaching out, in His

compassionate and merciful Love, and healing us, and restoring to us our rightful place with Him, within the Body of Christ.

But it's up to us. Jesus doesn't force us. We have to be the one, like the man with leprosy, to realize our need and come "running" to Jesus and allow Jesus to heal us. We can do that through the Sacrament of Penance---by making a good confession. That's the best way of all. And each and every day, we should spend time making a good Examination of Conscience, and asking Jesus for His spiritual healing every day.

As we all know, the Season of Lent---the season to experience Jesus' Love and Mercy---begins this week on Ash Wednesday. That means that it's time for us to make our Lenten resolutions regarding how we intend to deepen and strengthen our relationship with Jesus, and to more faithfully live our lives as His disciples. As you prayerfully decide what spiritual acts of prayer, fasting, and acts of charity you might choose to do for Lent, I think today's Gospel provides us with the makings of a great resolution: to make sure that we never purposely "excommunicate" anyone from our circle of friends or associates as a way of exerting some kind of power or control. And as a corollary to that, that we would do everything we can to work for reconciliation among people---to be one who works for unity, rather than division.

I think today's brief Second Reading gives us another wonderful resolution to consider, when St. Paul said: "...*Do everything for the glory of God.*" We all have various reasons, or motives, for doing what we do---to make ourselves look better, or to advance in our careers, to make more money, to have more friends. But, when we look at the big picture of our lives, the only One we really need to impress is God. And the only way to do that is to follow in the example of Jesus---through the good deeds that we do, through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy that we choose to practice, and ultimately doing what we do because it's the right thing to do and because it's what God knows will make us happy. What ultimately gives glory to God is when we live our lives as joyful and faithful disciples of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to reconcile, to heal, to unite, to bring people together, to end isolation and division, and to reach out in compassion. That is what WE are to do as well. Just like the man healed of leprosy who "*went away and publicized the whole matter, spreading his report abroad*", so too must we do as well---to accept the grace Jesus wants to give us to heal us of our sin, and then to be His Joyful witnesses to everyone we meet of God's goodness to us.

On this Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time, we not only celebrate Valentine's Day and the love of spouses, sweethearts, family and friends for one another. We also celebrate God's amazing Love for us, and the "Calling" that we have had since the day of our Baptism into Christ: to love all people, and to reach out with the Love and Compassion of Christ to bring His healing to all we meet. That's how we are to do what St. Paul urged us to do: "*Be imitators of Christ....and do everything we do for the Glory of God.*"