

Sixth Sunday B

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46; 1 Cor 10:31-11:1; Mark 1: 40-45

Illness or disease, more specifically skin affliction, is one to which all of us can relate. Who of us has never been sick? Whether it is a flu or cold or even a boil, rash, open sore, ugly scar or something much more serious.

When looking good is everything skin afflictions are humiliating. When the skin affliction is leprosy it is not only humiliating but ostracizing.

In today's readings, we hear very different responses to leprosy, a disease that was greatly feared in biblical times.

From Leviticus, we first hear of a very strict, law driven response to leprosy, aimed to protect the community from becoming infected. Fear of the contagion frightened many societies into expelling lepers from their midst.

Then, Jesus gave us a compassionate response that broke through the barriers and prejudices of his society.

**“... He stretched out his hand, touched him,
and said to him, ‘I do will it. Be made clean’”**

In one dramatic moment with a single touch the man was instantly cured and his life was restored to normal. In fact, when Jesus touched this leper life was never the same. Values of a culture based on appearances were reversed, barriers and prejudices of his society were forever changed.

This is very Good News for us today -- for there is much that God expects from us and what he created us to be.

God asks each of us to be caring for others – we often look after only our own needs. God asks each of us to be generous -- we often give only from our excess. God wants us to forgive -- we often hold grudges. God wants us to be merciful and compassionate -- we often judge, criticize, and put down. God wants us to love everyone in every circumstance -- we often simply love ourselves more than we love our neighbor.

And all of these things, in a sense, make us “unclean”, make us drift a little further from God, make us more and more of a “leper”, an “outcast”. And what does God do? He welcomes us back into the fold and embraces us once again. He doesn't banish us and force us to live apart. If anything, God invites us closer and holds us tighter. And for that we are forever grateful.

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Yet, make no mistake about it -- this story is not simply a reminder to us of the healing touch of God and his continual and infinite love for us. No, it is also a reminder to each of us that we are called to imitate our Lord Jesus and reach out to others in precisely the same way.

God doesn't just want to heal us and make us whole once again. God wants us to become healers too. God wants us to reach out to those on the margins. God wants us to stop finding reasons to push people away, but rather continually look for ways to include others, invite others, embrace others, and make them feel loved and accepted.

I am reminded of Father Damien, who gave himself unselfishly to serve the unfortunate lepers on Molokai. For 16 years in Kalaupapa, Father Damien not only ministered to lepers but willingly lived like a leper. He embraced lepers, bound up their afflictions, and practiced heroic virtue in the service of the exiled lepers.

One day, we all know, when he stood to speak to his flock, Father began his homily by addressing them as "We lepers." He had touched them so intimately as he bound their wounds, that he himself contracted the dreaded disease. He died in 1889 at the age of 49.

When Pope John Paul II beatified him in 1995, the Holy Father had this to say about Blessed Damien: "He showed forth Christ's tenderness and mercy for every human being, revealing the beauty of that person's inner self which no illness, no deformity, no weakness can totally disfigure ... he became a leper among the lepers ... he suffered and died like them, believing that he would rise again in Christ, for Christ is Lord."

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ:

If we seek to touch the hurting places of the world, we need to be prepared for the fact that there are costs involved. For Saint Damien of Molokai, it was his life. As he said, "I wish to give myself unconditionally to the poor lepers ... I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all to Jesus Christ."

This is the way the power that was in Christ continues to get out to a hurting world of today. To reach out and comfort the afflicted, to love the unlovely and embrace the ugly, makes us more like Christ, more spiritually beautiful.

Dear friends, God expects more of us. God does more for us. Maybe today's the day to start "doing something beautiful for God." ~ Saint Teresa of Calcutta.