

6th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Spiritual Leprosy”

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Can you imagine what it must have been like to have leprosy in ancient times? Instead of going to a doctor to receive medical care, you would go instead to a priest. The priest's role in biblical times would have been to look at the sores and deformities. If you were unlucky to have anything that looked like leprosy, the priest would not diagnose a disease to be treated. The diagnosis rather would be sin. The treatment would be segregation from the community. Many, if not most, of these poor souls would have to spend the rest of their days living in poverty. When they wandered into town to live off the charity of others, they had to repeat over and over to others, “I am unclean”. The implication was God had punished these poor people. It is horrifying to contemplate how badly these people were treated by society. It was easier to dismiss these people as sinners, rejected by God, than to cope with the horrific fear that sickness can happen to anyone at anytime, regardless of how good a person you are.

And so, God visits his people in the person of Jesus Christ. God's answer to our suffering is his solidarity with us in our flesh and blood. The Gospel says, “A leper came to Jesus and kneeling down begged him and said, ‘If you wish, you can make me clean.’ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, ‘I do will it. Be made clean.’” When God visits his people, the priests of old get a big surprise. The surprise is God loves us deeply, tenderly and loves us more than we love ourselves. God even identifies himself as someone in solidarity with those who are suffering, with those who have sores, with those who seek healing.

What I find interesting is that the Gospel concludes with Jesus remaining outside of the town, in the deserted place. That is exactly where our lepers were told to live at the end of our first reading from Leviticus, wasn't it? Outside of camp, in the deserted place! When you compare our first reading from Leviticus to our Gospel reading from St. Mark, a remarkable reversal has happened. God does not pitch his tent with those who say they are clean. God pitches his tent with those who say they are unclean. And I am with St. Paul when he writes, “All have sinned and fallen short of the Kingdom of God.” All are unclean. In the fullness of time, God reveals himself to us, as someone who wishes to heal us, not condemn us.

I hope you will agree with me how easy it is to create “leper colonies” even in today's day and age. How easy it is to create leper colonies at home, at work or school, in the parish, and in the wider community. For example, we may have family members who we just don't communicate with anymore because of something that happened in the past. Whatever that something was, they can be treated as unclean and forever rejected. We may know people at work or at school who are the brunt of every joke when their back is turned, effectively “colonizing” them with the other outcasts who don't measure up to our social expectations.

And we have a beautiful town and a beautiful state. On the other hand, it doesn't take long before you see that we also have a population of people in our area who suffer from poverty, lack of education, mental illnesses, drug addictions, the list goes on. As we all know, there are also millions of people in our world that suffer from malnutrition, poverty and curable diseases, curable diseases like leprosy. As we look around our families, our work, the school we attend, our parish and society and world, we can ask the question, "Where will I find Jesus?" What if that answer is literally staring at us in the mirror? What if Jesus is supposed to be discoverable in every place that we find ourselves precisely because we are there as one of his disciples? What can we do in our circle of influence to help bring Jesus ourselves to the leper colonies around us?

Do you know where I think how this journey begins? I believe this journey begins with this recognition: we are all unclean. We are all unclean. We all have wounds, lesions of the soul, weeping sores that fester in our hearts. Can we let Jesus touch these areas of our souls that hurt? Jesus gave us the sacrament of reconciliation that has the power to forgive even the most serious sins of a contrite heart. Jesus gave us the sacrament of anointing of the sick for those who are physically ill, a reminder that physical illness isn't a punishment from God. It is rather a cross to be carried and God wants to help us carry it. Jesus gave us his Body and Blood in the Holy Eucharist to nourish us in a way normal food can't satisfy, healing us from the inside out. Jesus gave us his empty tomb and hope for resurrection that serve as a reminder that the suffering in this world does not have to be pointless. Suffering can be redemptive, even a road to our salvation, if we allow God into the mix of our lives.

And so, as we begin the holy season of Lent this Wednesday, a good preparation would be to reflect on this Sunday's readings, asking ourselves, what are the areas in my life that are leprous? What are the areas in our souls that have sores or lesions? We can also ask: who are the lepers in my life, at home, at work, at school, or in our world? Can we in our prayer life approach Jesus and ask him to stretch out his hand and touch the areas of our life that need healing? Can I identify one way I can be an instrument of God's love to the lepers in my world? You see, my friends, every one of us deals with spiritual leprosy at some level. We all do. The remedy is Jesus, our Easter hope.