

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
February 15, 2009

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

Reach Out and Touch Someone

Today we have one of the many gospel stories about Jesus healing a leper. We often think of leprosy as a disease from biblical times, but it is important to remember that there are still about 200,000 new cases of leprosy reported each year in the world, mostly in the poor countries of Africa and the Caribbean. Some may not know that there was a leper colony established on one of the Hawaiian island, Molokai, in 1866. A very holy priest, Blessed Father Damien, served the people there for 16 years before he died of leprosy himself. New combinations of drugs developed in the 1940's have now made it possible to treat leprosy and eliminate much of the fear associated with the disease.

Leprosy, now called Hansen's disease after the doctor who identified the bacteria that causes it, is usually associated with pustules and scabs and white blotches of the skin as mentioned in our reading this morning from the Book of Leviticus. But the real impact of the disease is its effect on the nervous system. Joints, such as those in the hands and wrists and feet, lose their mobility and become partially paralyzed. The skin in the affected areas loses sensation. I was brought up with images of leprosy causing people to have parts of their body blacken and fall off. But this occurs only indirectly. When sensation is lost the leper doesn't feel his skin being burned; he doesn't feel the pain from cuts and other injuries. And these indirectly cause serious infections that destroy fingers and toes, and eventually hands and feet.

When I was in Haiti nine years ago, we visited a leprosy hospital. Most of the patients were adults, but there was one young girl who was about 12; she was about the age of my youngest daughter at the time. She had been sent to this hospital in the city and away from her village and family. And she was obviously very scared. The pain and discomfort of the disease did not compare to the pain of her isolation. And for the lepers at the time of Jesus, one of their greatest causes of suffering was the isolation and rejection of the community. As human beings we need and want contact and love from others.

And when the leper approached Jesus in our gospel this morning, we heard: "***Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, [and] touched him.***" Jesus could have stood on a hilltop overlooking a leper colony and prayed over them and caused them all to be cured without ever coming close; without ever touching them. But that is not what He chose to do. Jesus' willingness to allow the leper to approach Him, His willingness to reach out and touch him in compassion, probably meant as much to that leper as his physical cure.

And when we sin, our souls become stained; we become unclean and distance ourselves from our Christian community; from the Body of Christ. But no matter how serious our sins, no matter how we feel that we have distanced ourselves and isolated ourselves from the Church, we can come back on our knees in repentance. We can kneel in the confessional in front of Jesus present in the person of the priest, and we can say those words we heard from the leper: "***If you wish, you can make me clean.***" And Jesus speaking through the priest will say in reply: "***I do will it. Be made clean.***" There is no limit to God's mercy and forgiveness. We need only humble ourselves and ask for it on

our knees like the leper.

In another week and a half we will begin Lent. It is a time of repentance, a time of healing to come back to a closer relationship with God and the Church, the Body of Christ. It is a time to reflect on our sinfulness and to recognize the changes we need to make in our lives. I encourage you all to take advantage of the wonderful gift we have in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Come to confession regularly throughout the year, but especially during the Lenten season.

During Lent the Church offers us three practices to help us have a meaningful journey for the forty days: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. We often do a pretty good job praying more and giving up things, but sometimes we don't always devote enough, or any, effort to almsgiving, to helping the poor. And when we do, we often do it from a distance. We write a check and drop it in the mail to our favorite charity. And that is a good thing. Or we drop off canned goods at an unmanned collection site. And that, too, is a good thing. But we also need to reach out and make that personal connection and touch those in need. We need to visit the sick and the poor. We need to be welcoming people. We need to break down the barriers that isolate.

There is a week and a half until Lent begins. Start planning today how you and your family can comfort someone's soul, and not just relieve their hunger or physical discomfort. Think about ways that you can be like Jesus and reach out and touch those that society says are unclean and unworthy. And when you look into their eyes you will see the face of Christ.

Deacon Joe Hulway