

6th Sunday of OT – Mark 1:40-45

Leprosy Sunday

“Unclean, unclean!” The Law of Moses prescribed that those diagnosed with leprosy were required to announce to anyone they came close to that they had the disease. They also had to rend their garments, shave their heads, and pluck their beards. “Unclean!”

This is a clear case of quarantine from the Old Testament for what was thought as a contagious disease. Science would eventually prove this skin disease to be a bacterial infection and not easily contracted. This disfiguring skin disease carried with it severe personal and social consequences because it was believed to be highly contagious and stigmatizing.

“The irony of this gospel,” Elsie Miranda writes, “is that the leper who had been an outcast—the one whose bodily integrity was restored by Jesus—completely ignored his legal obligations according to the Law of Moses and dismissed his moral obligations to keep the matter of his healing confidential, which Jesus had requested. As a result, Jesus became the one who had to stay on the outskirts of town in isolation...The outcast is made clean and finds his way back into the community; meanwhile Jesus, who chose to make him well, is rendered the outcast.”

Isn't that what Jesus does for us, take on our sins and dies for us on the cross? How ironic, Jesus becomes the leper for our sake. He touches the leper and becomes unclean himself even before he heals him. “Moved with pity, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the leper, and said to him, “I do will it. Be made clean.”

How am I a leper? Who do I consider a leper? Is it by their looks, or by the way they dress, or their social standing, race, religion, sexual preference. The list is endless. Unless we, like Jesus, reach out to the leper and take on their sins, we will never know what they are going through each day of their life, especially if it is through no fault of their own.

Modern society and religion still stigmatize such people, such lepers. There are parishes and churches and faith communities that see the lepers as those who need to remain outside, even when the pope tries to reach out to them. There are those who have set themselves up to just others as the lepers because they cannot be like Jesus and take on the “sin” or “disease” of others.

They will never have pity for such lepers, and therefore the leper will never be healed, however that might manifest itself.

Maybe there is a leper right outside our church door waiting for us after mass. Maybe they are attending our mass right now and we don't even know they have a form of leprosy that would exclude them if we did know.

One parishioner wrote the following. "Perhaps my form of leprosy is being a thorn in the side of the establishment. Maybe it is speaking out about injustices in the Church on sexual abuse, racism, poverty, sexual orientation."

Fortunately, I believe that our faith community is very accepting of others. The question is how far? And that is where the pope is challenging us. How far? How far would Christ go? He embraced the lepers, healed them, and made them members of the community again. Maybe that is what we are really about in the name of Jesus. Rather than to exclude others, we are asked to invite and welcome them. We are asked by Jesus to bring comfort to others. As we become more like Jesus we will make others uncomfortable, especially in their comfortable places.