

## Homily – February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2024 – Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time



In both the first reading and the gospel, we have references to leprosy. That first reading, from the book of Leviticus, speaks about the consequences of being diagnosed with leprosy. The consequence is that lepers had to wear torn clothes, had to let their hair become disheveled, had to live outside the camp, and had to announce in a loud voice when approaching others, “Unclean, unclean!” Those were some

of the *consequences* of living with leprosy, but the deep *pain* of living with leprosy is the growing realization that no one cares. As the expression goes: “Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.” Jesus shows us how much he cared and how caring is the surest path out of isolation.

Lepers were the ultimate outsiders. They were, for the Hebrews, symbols of everything that is ugly, frightening, unacceptable, broken, and unlovable in the world. The hope was to distance yourself from all of that. If I can push that away in another, if I can push it outside the camp, maybe I won’t have to face it in myself. That’s the hope. But the deeper hope is that we can encounter someone who sees the whole package of who we are—including our brokenness and fears--accepts the whole package and helps us to love the whole package. There’s always something about ourselves, even in the most self-assured person, that we struggle to fully accept and love. Perhaps that is what Jesus was getting at when he challenged us to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. No one and nothing gets pushed away for Jesus.

A leper, left alone to face a deteriorating future, must have experienced excruciating isolation. Worse than the physical pain was the pain of realizing no one cares. This leper, in today’s gospel, heard of Jesus’ power to heal. More importantly, he heard that Jesus cares about those whom no one else cares about. He heard that Jesus includes the excluded.

The leper and Jesus are risk-takers. Jesus has the most to lose in the exchange. The leper reaches out to Jesus in faith risking further scolding and isolation from both society and his faith community. He has been warned to keep his distance. Both “Church” and “State” have a vested interest in keeping the leper in isolation and thus keeping themselves safe. Remember, it was both “Church” and “State” that teamed up to condemn and crucify Jesus safely *outside* the walls of Jerusalem, *outside* the camp. Calvary was Jesus’ leper colony, his banishment to the point of crying out not, “Unclean, unclean” but “Father, why have you abandoned me?”

This man suffering from leprosy reached out in faith towards Jesus with the words, ***“If you choose, you can make me clean.”*** It’s a funny way of putting it, isn’t it? The leper believes that Jesus has the power to heal him, but he’s not sure Jesus has the desire to do so. He knows Jesus can make him clean—that’s not the problem. The problem for the leper is that Jesus might choose not to do so. In the game of choice, it could go one way or the other; that’s the risk. It’s a big “if” occupying the mind of the leper. I think what he’s saying to Jesus is, “I know you have the power to make me better, but I don’t know *if* you care enough to exercise that power. I don’t know if you care or love enough to reach back to me as I am reaching out to you.”

Jesus responds with, ***“I do choose.*** Of course I want to heal you.” Without a moment’s hesitation, Jesus heals the man. It’s always God’s initiative to reach out to us to bring us healing and wholeness. If that’s God’s desire in each of our lives, it must also be Jesus’ desire for he did say, “I came to do the Father’s will.” The Father’s will is to bring healing and wholeness into the world. “Of course I want to heal you.” The cleansing says more about God’s outreach to the outcasts of this world than it celebrates God’s power over a physical ailment.

Jesus’ healing is not something that comes from the outside, like a physical touch. Jesus’ healing comes from the inside, from the world of union. Jesus unites with this man and sees the world through this man’s eyes. That’s what compassion means. Compassion means “to suffer.” Compassion means “to suffer with.” The leper is inviting Jesus to enter into his (the leper’s) world and to love him (the leper) on the basis that he is struggling to love himself. Jesus jumps at the invitation.

Notice Jesus gave the leper what he requested, but the leper does not return the favor. Jesus' compassionate outreach was intended to restore this man to the world of communion and community. That's why Jesus told him to say nothing but to show himself to the priest and make a ritual offering out of thanksgiving as the Law required. This is the way back to community. The story doesn't tell us whether the man obeys this command. But it does tell us he disobeys the command to say nothing to anyone.

He tells everyone. It's like the joy of winning the lottery and not being able to tell anyone. The ironic result is that **Jesus could no longer go into a town openly but was forced to stay in the country.** Under the laws of Leviticus, anyone who touches someone unclean is now considered unclean themselves. This blabbermouth leper has made it known to everyone that Jesus touched him. The cleansed leper can now enter the town, but the one who cleansed him must keep his distance. However, whether Jesus is in the town or country, people find him.

Jesus willingly healed this man. In doing so, one of the consequences is that this man freely went wherever he wanted to. Jesus gave him his freedom. Jesus gives the man freedom which prevents Jesus himself from freely going into the towns anymore. By the way, this is how Jesus saves us. He takes everything we don't love about ourselves and gives us back love and acceptance. He takes everything that holds us back and limits us in life and give us freedom.

It's the difference between reacting in life and responding in life. Jesus is the only person in the history of the world to never react and to always respond. When we react--and we're almost totally reactionary—we give back to others simply what they give to us. Slap me; I'll slap you back. Give me a Christmas present; I'll give you one back. Jesus has a little saying about this in Luke's gospel. He say, **"If you only love those who love you, what grace is there in that?"** That's the world of reaction, the world of tit-for-tat. Whatever you give me, good or bad, I give it back to you. The metaphor for the world of reaction is an electrical wire. Whatever charge goes into one end of the wire comes out the other end exactly the same. Contrastingly, think of a water filter. This is Jesus. This is the world of responding rather than reacting. Into the water filter goes all kinds of toxins, dirt, impurities, and what comes out the other end is pure water.

Jesus took in hatred, held it, transformed it, and gave back love. Jesus took in bitterness, held it, transformed it, and gave back graciousness. He took in curses, held them, transformed them and gave back blessings. He took in murder, held it, transformed it, and gave back forgiveness. He took in the sins of the world, held them, transformed them, and gave us back salvation.

Jesus took in the leper's isolation and unfreedom, held it, transformed it, and gave him back his freedom. He did it at great cost to himself. Both the leper and Jesus were risktakers. Jesus had the most to lose. That's what love is always willing to do. It's always willing to reach out and say, "Of course I choose you."

~Fr. Phil