

## WE ARE LEPERS ALL (Mk 1:40-45)

As you know, in ancient times, leprosy was a horrible disease that ate away at a person's flesh and was highly contagious. In order to prevent its spread, those with the disease were isolated from society. Lepers were distasteful to look at with their disfigurements ranging from simple sores or lesions on the skin to whole parts of the body being eaten away. It was not uncommon to see people without noses or lips or fingers or toes or huge chunks eaten away from their flesh. Fortunately, we have a cure for the disease so that we very seldom see it any more. Just when you thought that leprosy was under control, it rears up its ugly head in another form --- social leprosy. The isolation of members of our society continues on this day; members of the Body of Christ are being excluded from being fully a part of our assembly or made to feel unwelcome or like there is something wrong with them. It is ironic that the greater the technical advances in the field of medicine and science which prolong life, the greater are our fears of losing our life. And these fears drive us to isolate the other lest we contract the disease which they have.

Granted that we have terrible diseases today which cannot be cured, like AIDS and various viruses; the mere mention of the word "cancer" sends many scurrying into their caves to isolate themselves despite the fact that cancer is not contagious. We shrink back more and more from touching one another out of fear, while Jesus reached out and touched. There is great power in the human touch, the power to heal and the power to destroy, divine power and evil power, depending on whether we act out of compassion and mercy or out of anger and selfish need. When we compare **our** response to disease in others today with the response of Jesus to the leper, we find that Jesus had compassion for him even at the risk of himself being excluded from society. Jesus changed peoples' lives by means of a healing touch. Instead of getting out of the way of the leper, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. Jesus' love was totally radical and the radical nature of Jesus' love is what we are also called to live out in our lives in the midst of the fear of our world.

The physically sick or disabled are not the only social lepers. There is a deacon friend of ours who is a chaplain in Tehachapi prison. He holds Bible studies, does pastoral counseling for those who request it, and does communion services on a regular basis for the inmates, among whom are some of the worst criminals in our society. For those who are in prison for the most violent crimes, in order to attend the services, they have to be brought into the room in cages. In a sense it may seem odd to some of us to consider that these people are also part of the Body of Christ. Yet they are. You can imagine that the "Sign of Peace" takes on a whole

added dimension in that setting. There are little slots in the cages through which items can be given to the inmate without any physical touch. That is the opening through which the person receives the Body of Christ. One day when Clyde was distributing communion, he reached into this one cage and handed the host to the man. The guard had inadvertently left the flap in the slot open, and Clyde's hand touched the other man's hand. Immediately, the man burst into tears. It had been over 20 years since he had felt the touch of another human being, and just that simple touch moved him to his soul. People who are in prison are some of our modern day lepers.

Consider also those from other countries who might be looked upon as lepers, those who are here without the proper legal documents. To many of us they are known as "illegal aliens," a derogatory term implying that they are less than human. Just such a person is Juana Villegas, who was working in the U.S. illegally. She was pulled over one day for a simple traffic violation. She was placed in jail even though she was 9 months pregnant. During her time in jail she delivered her baby, cuffed by her feet to the hospital bed with a sheriff's officer standing guard during her delivery. Juana was separated from her newborn infant for two days, during which time her breasts became infected because she was not allowed to nurse her baby nor to use a breast pump and the infant developed jaundice.<sup>1</sup> As our country debates immigration laws, we should never forget the fact that the people whose fate we are considering are our brothers and sisters in Christ, not lepers.

Yet I think the more powerful aspect of today's gospel lies in the healing power which Jesus holds for each one of us in our own personal leprosy. We all feel diseased, inadequate, less than, not worthy of --- and so we isolate ourselves and try to hide our leprosy. Mary was watching Oprah the other day. She was doing a show on the widespread search for the perfect body. We know of the use of plastic surgery and botox injections in our country for cosmetic purposes to make ourselves more attractive and appealing to others so they won't see the ugliness we feel inside. But Oprah extended her show to demonstrate that this is a universal phenomenon. Brazil is the world's biggest user of plastic surgery for butt enhancement and breast implants. Iran has the greatest number of plastic surgery nose jobs, strictly for beauty purposes. In the west coast African country of Mauritania, a country bigger than France, women there are prized for their size, the bigger the better.

After hearing a sermon on pride, a woman approached the preacher with a confession. "I feel guilty," she said. "This morning before coming to church, I committed the sin of pride. I sat for an hour in front of my mirror admiring my beauty." To which the preacher replied, "My dear woman, that wasn't pride, that was imagination."

There is something within the human spirit, call it original sin or whatever, that tells us we are not good enough, that we have to be prettier, bigger, stronger, make more money, perform feats that others cannot do, become known for our accomplishments rather than simply living for the glory of God. God loves us radically and Jesus can heal us when we are prepared to come to him in complete faith as the leper did today. People who have been healed by Jesus inevitably have their lives changed. Peter and Andrew, James and John, Mary and Martha, the woman at the well, the adulterous woman, the man born blind --- all were, as Jesus described it to Nicodemus, “born again.” We were born again at our baptism. But to be “born again” implies that this is a new start; it’s just the beginning. Now, we are to let the power of the Holy Spirit, that great spirit of love, continue to change us and mold us and fashion us more and more into the compassionate, merciful, forgiving, touching presence of Christ to those around us. One of the greatest paradoxes of our Christian life is that the more we are able to move out of ourselves to touch others and to serve them, the more we are able to experience the loving presence of God within us. Then we come to know the joy that lies in God alone. The deepest hunger within us is the hunger for God to heal us from our human condition, from the leprosy we feel inside.

Jesus said that it is not what enters a person from the outside that defiles the person, but it is what comes from the inside that defiles the person. We might expand that to also say that it is not the outward, physical appearance of a person that makes them beautiful before God, but it is what comes from inside the person that makes them beautiful --- things like compassion, mercy, forgiveness, faith, hope, and love. Jesus’ touch will enable us to sing as Mary, his mother, sang in her Magnificat, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For He that is mighty has done great things. And holy is His name.”

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<sup>1</sup> “Has immigration crackdown gone too far?” by Julia Preston, NY Times News Service

Some material for this homily was taken from [Sunday Sermons](#) and [Sermon Warehouse](#) by Voicings Publication.