

HOMILY - Sixth Sun. in Ordinary [B] [Touching the Leper]

We are in the middle of winter – a good time to be a snowbird, if that’s possible! It is good to be on the inside – to be warm and included, but there are those who are not on the inside – those who are the excluded – the outcasts. For someone excluded, it is always winter, always cold, and always being on the outside looking in.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is approached by a single leper. The leper is obviously sincere, and shows his desperation by kneeling before Jesus. He may well realize he is violating the Mosaic Law, for he has not kept his distance from Jesus, and he has not called out: *Unclean! Unclean!*

We can imagine this scene in today’s context. Jesus’ advisors – his Apostles – would be weighing whether he should do this or not. One group might say he should not attempt this – after all, the leper was in the wrong for even approaching the Lord. The other group may say – well, go ahead, make it look like you’re touching him, but don’t really do so. Back and forth the debate might go, but the whole thing would be cut short, because before it could degenerate into argument and name-calling Jesus simply reaches forth, touches the man and says: *Be made clean!*

Lepers were the outcasts of the Bible. There was no way for them to pretend they were not a leper. A leper was instantly recognizable. And, the Mosaic Law had made it not only permissible, but required that all lepers be excluded. They had nowhere to go as they lived out their lives in exclusion.

As with all Gospel stories, there is much here to learn.

First is that the leper lived with the knowledge that not only was he unwanted, but people actually feared to be near him. The leper in the Gospel knew he was not supposed to approach healthy people, but he was so scared, miserable and alone, he couldn’t help himself. So he came up to the Lord and knelt down and begged for help. But listen to what he said: *If you wish, you can make me clean!* In other words, the leper isn’t questioning Jesus’ ability to heal him – he is questioning whether Jesus wants to heal him.

He is questioning whether Jesus wants to do this, because he thinks Jesus will have to touch him to do so – and after all, who in their right mind would want to touch a leper? What is our Lord’s response? Even though he could have healed the man by simply willing it, Jesus wants to show this man how much he loves him, and try to restore a shred of human dignity to him. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper and said: *Be made clean.*

One point to note from this Gospel story is one we might miss at first glance. For it is Jesus who has the power to cure – it is Jesus who is the giver of the miracle, yet it also was Jesus himself who was looked at as an outcast by his society. The biggest outcast of all in the Gospels isn’t the leper or the man born blind or even Zacchaeus the tax collector. The biggest outcast in the Gospels was Jesus Christ himself.

Here was a man without any apparent birth father. That meant that Jesus was supposedly born as an illegitimate. Here was someone who cured people on the Sabbath day, who forgave sinners and who admitted to the high priest that he was indeed the Messiah – a blasphemous offense in orthodox eyes. Jesus ate with known sinners, he was betrayed by a trusted disciple and he went to a shameful death – the death of a criminal on a cross.

Whenever we might be tempted to judge someone because they are different or exclude someone who doesn’t measure up to our standards, let’s take a look at the cross and behold the greatest outcast of all – the Lord Jesus. Because the label that will count on judgment day isn’t the one that *others* give us – it’s the label that the Lord will give us.

How many people are like this leper today – without hope, without options? These are the outcasts – the “dregs” of society. Who are today’s dregs? The drug dealer – the gang member – the terrorist beheading others – these are the dregs of today’s society. And it is easy for us – the respectable people – to look down on these blighted souls. It isn’t that they have not done wrong – they have – it’s that we also have done wrong!

This calls up another lesson from today’s Gospel. This is the idea that we ourselves are not the leper – we are not in any need of a miraculous cure, much less getting down on our knees and begging for it.

Too many of us are aware that now and then, we've done something we regret, but we rationalize by thinking, at least I've never killed someone or committed horrible crimes. Yet, when it comes to causing hurt or pain to other human beings, it isn't the type of the wrong - it's that we have hurt others at all. Whenever we participate in excluding or mocking or abusing others, we are in need of a cure - a cure from blind self-righteousness.

Because the ground underlying excluding or judging other people is based on the fact that we are different. For some people, different means wrong or bad. Those of a different skin color, or different religion or different politics - wrong! Pushed to its logical conclusion by anger and the need to be right, it leads to *dehumanizing* those who disagree with us - it ultimately leads to such things as the Holocaust and the thousands of lynchings black Americans suffered in this country.

Instead, we must all learn to touch the lepers of our society - touch them with our compassion and treat them as human beings. We "touch" the lepers of society by learning to build up those who are different. We reach out with compassion when we refuse to blame or exclude someone who is different. We show healing when we seek compromise and peace, not angry vindication of our position.

Jesus touched the leper that day because he wanted to show everyone the compassionate way to treat a desperate human being. The mercy and love Jesus felt for this outcast resulted in a miracle. It is an action we too can duplicate by reaching out to those who are cast out from society and affirming them. There is a healing power involved when we include someone else in our normal ring of friends or family. It makes no difference if the other person accepts the invitation - the point is that we tried to include - not exclude. It is a warmth that cheers up the coldest winter day.

Let us pray then, for the grace to praise and not demean and to judge no one as less than human, lest we too be judged the same way by God.

When we come to face Jesus as our Judge on the Last Day, he won't ask us how many friends we had, or whether we took good care of our family - he will ask us:

When you lived your life on earth, how did you treat the least of my brothers and sisters?

For that is how you treated me!