



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 11, 2018

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Themes in Scripture

Today's First Reading is from the third book of the Torah which contains instructions about how the Israelites are to live as the people of God. In this passage, God gives Moses and Aaron a procedure for protecting the community from contagious disease. In the centuries before science, any skin lesion carried the risk that it could be leprosy, a contagious, fatal disease. Today's reading is a matter-of-fact description of the method to be employed for determining if a potentially infected individual must be isolated from his or her community. There is no intent in the Law to punish someone who is sick, although in those days, illness was believed to be God's punishment for sin. The Law seeks only to identify a risk of contagion and protect the community from deadly disease. Still, when the priest took the necessary steps to protect the community, the effect on the individual was devastating. Loss of family, community, and livelihood were bad enough, but the leper's distress and hopelessness was made worse by the assumption that one's suffering and isolation was brought about by one's sinfulness.

Mark ends the first chapter of his Gospel by describing Jesus' encounter with a leper. According to Mark, people came in great numbers to seek and receive healing from Jesus. Up to this point, Mark reports the healing of only two individuals: Peter's mother-in-law and the man possessed by a demon. In both of those cases, the person's need for healing was brought to Jesus' attention and he healed them. In today's story, the leper approached Jesus alone. The leper violated the law by approaching anyone who was not unclean like himself, but he had to take this risk. People feared him; there was no one who would bring him to Jesus for healing. The leper assumed a posture of begging before Jesus. His words acknowledged that his only hope lay in Jesus: what he wanted was impossible but he believed Jesus could make it happen just by wanting it, too. Jesus knew about the dangers of leprosy. He knew that the Law required the leper's isolation for the protection of others, yet he was so moved with pity that he touched the leper and told him that it was his will, *his desire*, to heal him.

Perhaps Mark ended his introduction of Jesus with this story because it perfectly encapsulates the reason that God came among us in the person of Jesus. Like all God's children, the leper does not live as God intended. Like all God's children, he lives in a world crushed by sin, estrangement, brokenness, and death. The leper cannot change this. Apart from God, his situation is hopeless. The leper took his risk because he intuited that Jesus wished to save him. In his encounter with the leper, Jesus' actions, intention, and compassion reveal the will of God. He has come to restore lives, to bring people to wholeness, and to invite them into a loving relationship with himself.

Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

Reading I: I: Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46

Those who are sick shall live outside the camp.

- The Book of Leviticus is a collection laws; many having to do with the proper worship of God.
- In today's reading we hear of illness and exclusion from communal life.
- Because people did not know about the process of contagion at the time, the community banished persons with any skin disease as long as the disease lasted.

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 32: 1-2, 5, 11

Lord, forgive the wrong I have done.

Reading II: 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1

Imitate me as I do Christ.

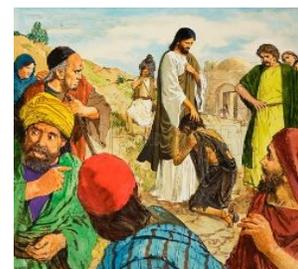
- The passage from 1 Corinthians refers to a concern the early Christians had about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols.
- Paul makes the point that our behavior toward others is more important than what we eat or drink.
- Paul's advice is to avoid offending one another at all costs.

Gospel: Mark 1:40-45

If you will do so, you can cure me.

- The Gospel story shows that Jesus not only has the power to cure disease, he also has the power to heal the separation from the community and the separation from God, which leprosy signified.
- Jesus' approach to the leper would have scandalized the people of his time.
- By touching the leper, Jesus demonstrated the arrival of the kingdom of God.

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Alpha begins February 20. Come and experience the joy of the Gospel.

You Can Make Me Clean

Did you ever notice how time seems to slow down during the most meaningful moments of life? We may drive home without remembering a single portion of a 30-minute trek through traffic; someone accustomed to the kitchen may fix dinner hardly noticing the particulars she tends to in pre-heating, seasoning, chopping and putting a casserole in the oven. Yet, when we are standing at the bedside of a dying parent, attending the birth of a child or asking the question that will lead to a life-long decision, each second seems to have its own import as our feelings blend with sensual perceptions and create enduring memories. It is as if time's duration comes with variable thickness or weight.

Mark tells the story of Jesus and the man with leprosy with moment-enhancing emotion. Perhaps it is because Jesus had just told his disciples that going out among the people was the very reason for which he had come. Perhaps Mark knew the man in question and had reminisced about the story with him. Maybe it was just that Mark had discovered that the time of Jesus' life overflowed with moments of profound meaning and Mark dedicated himself to communicating them. For whatever motive, Mark tells this story in evocative detail.

When the leper came to Jesus, he was doing something forbidden. He must have been at least a little frightened. Instead of respecting the law that relegated him to the margins of society, he knelt down in front of Jesus as to one who not only had the power to help him, but who could also exercise the freedom to do what the law would not and could not do: to accept and heal rather than banish him.

Speaking with the audacity of someone who has no other options, the man summoned Jesus to reveal what he was all about: "If you wish, you can make me clean." The man had no question about whether Jesus could accomplish the feat, only whether Jesus wanted to do so, whether he would choose it as part of the mission for which he had come.

According to Mark, the man's request stirred Jesus to his depths. Even before he could speak, his hand was reaching out, touching the man's spurned and suffering body, transforming it with tenderness. Then pronouncing the words that explained his gesture and made his will effective, Jesus said, "I do will it. Be made clean."

With that, Jesus commissioned the healed man as the first apostle to the leaders of the Jews: "Go, show yourself to the priest ... offer what Moses prescribed; that will be proof." Whether the man got to the priests, we do not know, but he did not follow Jesus' order to keep quiet with others. His story made Jesus the man of the moment and took away any hope of anonymity. If he did not go to the towns, they came to him.

What gave this story its "thickness" was the man's vulnerable openness and honesty and Jesus' spontaneous tenderness. The man knew his own need like no one else, and he was willing to expose it. While society refused to countenance him, he found in Jesus someone who had no fear of contamination or mortality. The afflicted man's audacity met Jesus' utter freedom to love and that combination proclaimed the Gospel in the sight of the people.

It is a beautiful story. But, what does it tell those who do not suffer from leprosy? First of all, the story calls us to a recognition of all that we share with the leper. Since his condition was obvious, society ordered him to hide away from sight. We, on the other hand, are quite adept at hiding our weakness and the unsightly, sinful aspects of our life. Perhaps the worst of it is that we can hide them from ourselves, believing in the image we project rather than the truth of who we are. Our friend the one-time leper would remind us that Christ can only touch and heal what we bring before him; if we don't bring our genuine self, we will never truly encounter Christ. He might add that we never hear of Jesus reaching out and touching someone who was self-sufficient, but only those who knew they needed him.

Coming before God with a willingness to be nothing other than ourselves and to expose our need will take us into the realm of thick time. We may do that in private prayer, in sacrament or with a community. Mark told the story in a way that points out that the time and place do not matter. What is vital is the courage to place our truest self before God as well as the vulnerability to allow God to touch and transform us. Whether we ask for healing or forgiveness or inspiration, we can trust what Jesus said: "I do will it!"

May God's will be done!

Written by Sister Mary McGlone.
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