

Homily for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

February 11, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46 (The leper shall cry out “unclean!” and make his abode outside the camp.)

Responsory: Psalm 32 (I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.)

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 (Do everything for the glory of God.)

Gospel: Mark 1:40-45 (Jesus cures a leper.)

Do you remember those awful early days of the pandemic, before vaccines became available? Anytime somebody coughed or sneezed within six feet of us, we instantly worried that we might have been exposed to COVID. For a week or more, we lived in fear that the virus might be silently lurking inside us, cleverly working around our unprepared immune system to infect our airways and attack our lungs. Even scarier, we knew that infection would bring not just illness, but also total isolation from family and friends. Entire hospitals and nursing homes became isolation wards. People were suffering and dying alone, separated from loved ones and from society.

The plight of lepers in the first century was even worse. Their disease was highly contagious, but also incurable, disfiguring, degenerative, and always fatal. The body's immune system could not fight it off. Once a person contracted leprosy, there was no hope. The disease would take one part of the body after another, until there was nothing left. Because there was no treatment and no means to stop transmission from one person to another, the only solution was for lepers to be shunned by society and sent into exile. Imagine how horrible it would be for them to live as outcasts, wandering about on the outskirts of towns and crying out, “Unclean!” whenever someone ventured too near. These poor, pathetic creatures were truly “untouchable,” both literally and figuratively.

The leper who approaches Jesus in today's gospel is suffering not just from his disease, but also from the social isolation that his disease imposes on him. No one can come near enough to lend a helping hand or offer a word of encouragement. Yet, this man dares to approach Jesus, because he is absolutely convinced that Jesus can heal him. So great is his faith that he doesn't even dare to ask for the miracle that he so desperately desires. He simply professes his belief that Jesus *can* make him clean, if he wishes, and he leaves the decision in Jesus' hands. Without saying it, the leper clearly implies by his actions, “*Thy will be done.*” Fortunately for him, Jesus *does* wish to heal him and “make him clean.”

To our modern ears, “healing” the leprosy and making the leper “clean” sound equivalent. Once Jesus cures the man's disease, it seems to us that his life should return to normal immediately. But it's not quite that simple. In many cases, including leprosy, the Law of Moses made no distinction between *physical disease* and *spiritual corruption*. To be “unclean” implied both. So, to his friends and neighbors, this poor guy infected with leprosy was considered both physically and spiritually contaminated. The Law also made no distinction

between removal from the community of the faithful and separation from God. To be cast out of the community also implied losing one's share in the covenant between God and his people. So, this man, quite literally, had lost *everything*.

The Leviticus reading that we heard today describes the formal process by which disease leads to a judgment of uncleanness, which leads to social isolation and spiritual exclusion. Later in the same book, the Law also provides a process to reverse all of these sanctions, if what was *thought* to be leprosy turns out to be something more benign. If the disease goes away on its own, the priests can examine the person again and judge him to be both physically and spiritually "clean." Then he is free to rejoin the community, restoring not only his relationships, but also his personal dignity and his identity as a child of the covenant. Hence, to be "made clean" meant to be *made whole*, not merely cured of disease.

In the course of his ministry, Jesus "cleansed" many people who were languishing on the margins of society, suffering from various forms of exclusion and rejection. Some, like the leper, had been forced out of the community through no fault of their own. Jesus took pity on such people and used his power to restore them to physical and spiritual health. Some were not formally excluded from the community, but simply forgotten and ignored, because of their poverty or other afflictions that they had suffered. Jesus called them, "the least of my brothers and sisters." He loved them dearly and identified with them. He even declared many of them to be "blessed" in the midst of their sorrows. Most controversial of all, Jesus also reached out to those who were marginalized because of their *sinfulness*. Though many religious leaders considered such people to be as untouchable as any leper, Jesus invited them to draw near to him, to repent of their sins, and to believe in God's abundant mercy.

Today's gospel shows *Jesus* reaching out to offer healing and wholeness, but he also commissioned his disciples to do the same. He sent them out with authority to heal diseases, cast out demons, minister to the afflicted, preach repentance to sinners, and proclaim that the Kingdom of God is at hand. The mission of the Church really is not so different twenty centuries later. Followers of Jesus are still called to *build* the Kingdom of God, not just to *proclaim* that it's here. And building the Kingdom of God implies *action*. It implies outreach, healing, acts of mercy and compassion – all those things which restore people to health, dignity and community.

These actions on our part sometimes come at a personal cost, just as they did for Jesus. We saw what happened to him after he cleansed the leper. While that man went back home to his family and his community, Jesus was forced to remain "outside in deserted places" in order to avoid the constant demands being placed on him. At least to some degree, Jesus bore the hardship that he removed from the leper. In that sense, this story may foreshadow for us Jesus' passion and death on the cross, when he took upon himself *all* the punishment for our sin, in order to set us free.

The consequences for us certainly will not be *that* dire, but there often is a real cost associated with reaching out to others in charity. It's often hard, frustrating work, and we always seem to end up wishing that we could accomplish more. But our goal is not to solve every problem and restore all that has been lost. We need to be content just to follow in Jesus' footsteps and bring *whatever healing we can* to people who are hurting. If we're willing to open our hearts, and even willing to have them broken from time to time, we can do a lot to bring Christ's love to the people who need it most.