

6th Sun, Feb 11th, 2024. The reservoirs of God's mercy among us.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “When anyone has a swelling or a rash or a shiny spot on their skin that may be a defiling skin disease, they must be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons who is a priest. The man is diseased and is unclean. The priest shall pronounce him unclean because of the sore on his head. “Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face, and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ As long as they have the disease, they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp. (Leviticus 13: 1-2, 44-46).

Leprosy in the Bible is a name applied to several different diseases and was greatly feared in ancient times. Some of these diseases, unlike the disease we call leprosy or Hansen’s disease today, were highly contagious. This is a chronic infection that affects and eventually destroys the skin. The worst of them slowly turned the body and, in most cases, were fatal. Now in keeping with the law in Leviticus, Jewish leaders declared people with leprosy unclean. Since priests are responsible for the health of the community, it was their job to expel and readmit lepers.

Lepers were separated from family and friends and confined outside the community. Both in the OT and in the time of Jesus, lepers had no rights either to medical care or to other kinds of help from the community. Lepers were taken away from their families and forced to live in leper colonies or in caves outside the city. This means that lepers were unfit to participate in any religious or social activity.

In addition, the law said that contact with any unclean person made a person unclean, too, some people even threw rocks at lepers to keep them at a safe distance. Even the mention of the name of this disabling disease terrified people. The Book of Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46 demanded that lepers wear the tattered clothes and uncombed, uncut hair of mourners. When meeting any “sound” person, a leper had to cover his mouth with one hand and shout out a warning of his/her own “unclean” condition.

Thus, it would be no wonder if **Jesus were indignant** (feeling of anger or annoyance at what is perceived as unfair treatment) about conventions that forced the leper to live like an animal, without rights or privileges. How astonishing it was, then, when Jesus reached out and touched this man who had leprosy in the gospel of Mark! Leprosy is often used in the bible as an illustration of sin because sin is contagious and destructive and leads to separation.

Jesus Heals a Man with Leprosy: A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: “See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” Instead, he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere. (Mark 1:40-45)

With Christ’s gentle touch, this man was instantly healed, and restored to his family, back to his community. He can now join the community to worship God in the holy Temple. What a joy! Christ

here objects to the whole ancient Jewish notion that lepers were sinners beyond God's embrace. That might be precisely why He healed the leper by "stretching out his hand, touching" the legally untouchable. By instructing the healed leper to go and show himself to the priest, Christ challenges the religious authorities to see that God's healing grace is available to anyone who asks.

Maybe we need to tear down the walls that separate us from others and build bridges of loving relationships. Jesus calls every one of us to demolish the walls that separate us from each other and to welcome the outcasts and the untouchables of society.

Question: How do we treat those who are different from us? These include the sick, the imprisoned, alcoholics, drug addicts, immigrants, the homeless, the divorced, unmarried-single mothers, immigrants, the mentally ill, and homosexuals. God's loving hand must reach out to them through us. Jesus wants us to reach and touch their lives. Let us re-examine today the barriers we have created in the past, and approach God with a heart that is ready to welcome the outcasts in our society.

St. Francis of Assisi and the leper: At one time in his life, he had a terrible fear of lepers. Then one day when he was out for a ride, he heard the warning bell that lepers were required to ring in the Middle Ages. When a leper emerged from a clump of trees, St. Francis saw that he was horribly disfigured. Half of his nose had been eaten away; his hands were stumps without fingers and his lips were oozing white pus. Instead of giving in to his fears, Francis slid down from his horse, ran forward, embraced the leper, and kissed him. Francis' life was never the same after that episode. He had found a new relationship with God, a new sensitivity to others, and a new energy for his ministry. The sick and the maimed are not to be objects of scorn, but potential reservoirs of God's mercy for us. Amen. Thank you.

God bless you and your family.

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