

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 11 Feb 2024 + Lev 13:1-2, 44-46 + Mk 1:40-45

As we said last Sunday, today's Gospel rounds out the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, where Jesus reveals both the content and method of His preaching and self-revelation. Today, He reveals Himself to be our divine healer. But before we consider this, I would like to begin by looking at our 1st reading from the book of Leviticus. Now to postmodern ears, this prescribed treatment of lepers might seem cruel and harsh. But remember, at this time in human history, there was no understanding of medicine and disease, such as we have today. In fact, the term leprosy used here is probably not the "leprosy", or Hansen's disease as we know it. Rather, it can mean a number of skin diseases, which were evidently very contagious. And so the strict rules for those with such diseases were likely not meant to punish the afflicted, but to safeguard the community.

And so while the strict segregation of lepers as 'unclean' was a drastic measure that had to be taken, it was also a source of enormous physical and spiritual suffering. That is, to be declared 'unclean' meant that the person was excluded from the community. But perhaps even worse, he or she was not allowed to participate in the communal worship of the people. Contrary to today, where sadly we know many Catholics don't fulfill their privilege and duty to come together each week to worship God at Mass, during the time of Moses, communal worship was the center of Israel's existence. To not be able to participate in the liturgical life of the community was the source of untold suffering for a leper.

So now fast-forward to the Gospel, where Jesus reveals to us the true compassion of God for the suffering. God did not forget these poor souls. In Christ, He has come to save them. And so we hear Jesus do the unthinkable: He reaches out and *touches* the leper. That's no small detail. Not only was Jesus running the risk of becoming infected with the disease Himself, but even more scandalizing, He was making Himself ritually unclean. Obviously, both of these were of little concern to Jesus. Nothing can make Jesus unclean; rather, he makes everyone clean, if only they ask. And that too is a key point. Notice that the man doesn't even ask Jesus to heal him of his leprosy. Rather, he asks to *be made clean*.

So how might this 'cleansing' apply to us today? Well, let's start by looking at physical healing. We know that we can and should pray for healing for others and for ourselves, because we believe that God can and does still heal the sick, sometimes in a miraculous way. And yet—this is so hard—we also know that not everyone we pray for is physically healed. Jesus Himself did not physically heal every sick person in Israel that He encountered. And that is a stumbling block to many. But the truth is that Jesus did so much more than heal the sick. Because anyone who is healed of sickness will still die someday. In fact, Jesus did even more than raise the dead to life. After all, even Lazarus would die again. Jesus conquered death and burst open the gates of eternal life in heaven! Because of the resurrection of Jesus, now shared with all who come to Him through faith and baptism, we no longer need to fear death! And that is the greatest gift of healing we can ever imagine!

We also know that God's healing power is not just limited to physical healing. Through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, priests have the authority to forgive sins in the name of God. Yes, only God can forgive sins. But because God is God, He is free to do what He wants with His gifts. And He chose to confer this power on lowly men such as His disciples and on their successors by means of a Sacrament. And those who are healed of their sins are truly changed, truly forgiven. And that too is beyond any merely-human hope!

So many people carry such deep shame and guilt over past sins and failings, and this is such a heartbreak, because it doesn't have to be that way. Tragically, just as Mass attendance has plummeted in the Western world over the last many decades, so has the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When you go to Confession, you are truly, completely made clean! Unlike some other Christians, as Catholics, we believe that God doesn't just cover over your sins. He doesn't just turn away from them and pretend that He doesn't see them. He truly absolves them, obliterates them, swallows them up in the abyss of His love. Yes, we have to live with the consequences of our choices. What's done is done—God cannot erase the past. But He can and He does make us clean in His sight, from the inside out. He always and everywhere heals our souls whenever we ask. *I do will it*, Jesus says to the leper: *Be made clean!*

And yet there is more. In addition to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Church has many other healing remedies in Her storehouse: the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, and various sacramentals, ranging from the simple holy water to major exorcisms. We also have healing prayer, which we offer at our Encounter evenings. And we need this healing, because just as each of us are sinners, each of us have been sinned against too. We are the walking wounded. Pretty much everyone has been abused, neglected, rejected, misjudged, hated, and injured in countless ways. So much so, I often marvel at the fact that this world gets along as well as it does! This is also why we must forgive each other; we can't pretend like we are the only ones who have ever been wounded in this world.

Now, the Church rightly talks a lot about evangelization these days. But sadly, so often our talk stays there, at the level of talk. We live in a scientific age. Most people today will only believe what they see. And so people need to see the difference our faith in Christ makes in our lives before they will ever even begin to crack open the door to the possibility of making an act of faith themselves. They need to see that healing is possible. Now it's true, many people refuse to admit that they are in need of a Healer. And it is also true that we can't offer them perfection. But we can offer them hope. Like the leper in today's Gospel, we should not be afraid to speak about the way Jesus has healed us and made us clean.

But obviously, before we can do that, we must first be healed. We must first bring our own sinfulness, our own brokenness, and our own inability to heal ourselves before Jesus. It's not magic. All it takes is a desire to be healed so deeply that you are willing to humbly come before the Lord and beg with Leper: *Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean.*