

***FIRST IMPRESSIONS* 6th SUNDAY (B)**

. Leviticus 13: 1-2, 44-46 Psalm 32 I Corinthians 10: 31-11:1 Mark 1: 40-45
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The treatment of lepers, as spelled out in the Book of Leviticus today, seems harsh. But let's not demonize the Israelites. With little understanding of the cause of leprosy but noticing its awful consequences on the bodies of its victims, the community was frightened of contagion. To keep themselves and their families safe they isolated the sufferers. The diagnosis of leprosy was approximate, to say the least, since any skin lesion, scab or rash might be labeled leprosy. (Leviticus describes the signs on the skin of possible leprosy this way, "a scab, pustule or blotch which appears to be the sore of leprosy.")

Guided by Leviticus' code, the Levitical priests were directed to diagnose the symptoms, make a decision and, if the person were thought to have the disease, he or she was to be excluded, ordered to "dwell apart." Having leprosy was bad enough, but for Mediterranean people of the time exclusion from the community was like death. Without a community a person would be considered a non-person. Indeed, in such a hostile world, where community support and protection were sometimes essential for survival, loss of your community could mean actual death.

For Israelites, God was worshiped in the community; being cut off from that community also meant being cut off from God. Added to all this was the belief by many that people so afflicted were being punished for their sin. So, a leper who passed by with the required rent garment, bare head, crying, "Unclean, Unclean!" might just as well have been shouting, "I am a sinner, I am a sinner." To be cured of leprosy then was like being raised from the dead. The leper needed a life-giving touch from a compassionate God, and he got just that when he heard Jesus' cleansing words and felt his healing touch.

The community wanted its members back as whole and full participants. Thus, a person healed of leprosy would be considered a whole person again. When Jesus healed the leper he was restoring a full person back to the community; in the eyes of his neighbors and family, the man was both physically and spiritually cleansed – no more disease, meant no more sin, which supposedly was the cause of the disease. Jesus freely dispensed his mercy in response to the man's request, "I do

will it. Be made clean.”

By curing the leper Jesus was showing his mastery over sin. But he didn't want the cure and its accompanying significance to be a private matter between just him and the man. That's why he told the man to go to the priests for verification (check chapter 14 for the process the priests were to follow). It sounds like Jesus wanted to include the priests and the community in this cure so that they might come to know that someone had arrived who could help them overcome sin and all its consequences.

And the consequences of sin are legion. Who hasn't experienced the effects of the leprosy of sin in our personal and communal lives? The selfishness of sin cuts a person off from family members and friends when: lies are told; goods squabbled over; siblings exhibit rivalry; parents play favorites; spouses argue excessively and don't seek help; success is measured by the size of income; students cheat in school. Hansen's disease, the medical name for leprosy, is treatable with drugs. Sin and its fragmenting and isolating effects are not so easily eliminated.

Once again we hear the echoes of the opening of Mark's gospel when the Baptist promised the crowds, “One more powerful than I is coming after me. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Today's gospel shows again that the one John promised has arrived. The people should have been able to read the signs and concluded, “If he can cure leprosy then he must have power to heal sin.” Next week's gospel (Mar4 2: 1-12) will again link sickness and sin and show Jesus' power over both.

Mark is telling us that each hearer of the gospel experiences Jesus' compassion and desire to heal us. What he said to the leper is offered to a sinful world and to each of us as well. At this Eucharist we are like the beggar who says to Jesus, “If you wish, you can make [us] clean.” Not to distract you from today's Eucharist, but we can hear how our worship today applies the gospel story to us and our world. Listen to how many times the words mercy, cleansing, forgiveness, grace, salvation, healing, etc. are said throughout our service. For example, today's prayer over the gifts says, “Lord we make this offering in obedience to your word. May it cleanse and renew us and lead us to our eternal reward. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord.”

There it is – we reach out to God through Jesus and ask to be cleansed. Jesus'

quick and willing response to the leper is our reassurance that, once again, he says to us, “I do will it. Be made clean.”

But the leprosy of sin isn’t just a personal affair; its effects shatter the people and nations of the world. Unfortunately, it is too easy to find evidence of this. I am currently on a plane, so I can’t check the internet or reference books for proof positive of the signs of sin’s effects on the world. But I do have a newspaper and the debris left by sin is right there on the front page. As you might expect these days, the major stories are from the financial world. Here are a few things I read: a major bank cut its losses and withdrew hundreds of millions invested with Bernard Madoff, accused of cheating people of 50 billion dollars. But the bank never informed its investors of its concerns, and their notes are “probably worthless.”

More from Wall Street: despite the multi-billion dollar bailouts and the collapse of some major financial institutions, some of the most prominent names in the business world collected an estimated 18.4 billion in bonuses last year. There was a string of arsons that destroyed 15 inner city houses in Coatesville, Florida. Five teenagers are accused of killing a Latino man and attacking others on Long Island. It is believed still others were involved in the racially-motivated attacks. Several guards are accused of encouraging attacks by prison gangs on teenagers at a juvenile facility. On the sports page today there is still more evidence that some top athletes have used steroids to artificially enhance their abilities.

Then, of course, there are Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Gaza, global warming, famine, etc. There is just not enough space to list the evidence of sin and its effects on our world’s people. Will we ever be able to come together as a community, or will our leprosy keep driving us apart, constructing walls and causing us to settle our differences with might?

People who get seriously ill or are infirmed for a long time say they feel cut off from the community – the fate of lepers. Society tends to forget these members easily and moves on to other preoccupying concerns. But in our church community we don’t forget our infirmed and isolated sisters and brothers. We have volunteers who take the Eucharist to the homebound, those in nursing homes and prisons. These ministers represent us, and, through them, Jesus once again reminds them that they are still part of our us.

And who are we? We are a community of people always in need of cleansing;

always stretching out our hands saying to Jesus, “If you want, you can make us clean.” And he responds quickly and with compassion, as he did for the leper and continues to do for us, “Of course I want to, be clean.”

QUOTABLE

...at a time when the liturgy renewed by the [Second Vatican] Council has given greatly increased value to the Liturgy of the Word, it would be a mistake not to see in the homily an important and very adaptable instrument of evangelization. Of course, it is necessary to know and put to good use the exigencies and the possibilities of the homily, so that it can acquire all its pastoral effectiveness. But above all it is necessary to be convinced of this and to devote oneself to it with love. This preaching, inserted in a unique way into the Eucharistic celebration, from which it receives special force and vigor, certainly has a particular role in evangelization, to the extent that it expresses the profound faith of the sacred minister and is impregnated with love.

— Pope Paul VI, in “On Evangelization in the Modern World,” December 8, 1975, #43.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand,
touched the leper and said to him,
“I do will it. Be made clean.”

Reflection:

Who are we at this Eucharist today? We are a community of people always in need of cleansing; always stretching out our hands saying to Jesus, “If you want, you can make us clean.” And Jesus responds quickly and with compassion, as he did for the leper, “Of course I want to, be clean.”

So, we ask ourselves:

- Who are the modern “lepers” in our world, people shunned for no fault of their own?
- Is there someone, neglected by others, that I need to stretch out my hand to?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

[Thirty five people were killed last year in Raleigh, N.C. On February 5th there was a vigil service outside the police headquarters and the following was prayed by those present.]

VIGIL AGAINST VIOLENCE

Leader:

Let us remember all who have been harmed by violence. We acknowledge the strength of those who survived and of those still struggling to heal.

Community Voices:

For their sake and for ours, we commit ourselves to building each other up and to healing.

Leader:

Let us remember the families and loved ones of those who have died in violent crimes. We acknowledge their pain and their deep grief.

Community Voices:

They are part of our community and need our love and help towards healing.

Leader:

Let us remember the perpetrators and the families of those who commit violent crimes. We acknowledge that their lives, too, are devastated and their hopes dashed.

Community Voices:

For their sake and for ours, we remember that pain goes in many directions from each act of violence.

In Unison:

We will stand up to violence.

We stand together expressing our unity, our connection to each other and to the Divine.

We pray for healing and for transformation.

Let the Spirit of our Creator move through us, helping us to transform and heal our communities; And let us begin by transforming ourselves.

Leader: We go in peace and with hope. Amen

[Used with the permission of Rev. Rachel Smith, Raleigh, NC]

“God Not Guns Sabbath: Worship Guide” is available for download at:

www.godnotguns.org

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, *"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty"* If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Carl Moseley #0294212 (On death row since 10/1/92)
- Nathan Bowie #0039561 (2/5/93)
- William Bowie #0039569 (2/5/93)

----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

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