

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 6<sup>TH</sup>. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)  
FEBRUARY 13, 2000

Leviticus 13: 1-2, 44-46 I Corinthians 10: 31-11:1 Mark 1: 40-45

Dear Preachers:

“Once, far away and long ago....” That’s what it sounds like in today’s Leviticus reading. At that time people made a direct connection between a physical ailment and sin. So, if a person were afflicted with an ailment, in this case leprosy, it was presumed to be punishment for some sin the person or parents had committed. The community needed protection, not just from the possibility of physical contagion, but from moral corruption as well. Besides human contagion, houses and fabrics were also polluted by contact with a leper. The seeming need for protection resulted in the expulsion of the afflicted person from the community. So, we read in Leviticus today, lepers were to “dwell apart”. In such a community-oriented world, expulsion was a terrible penalty. An individual’s very identity came from membership in a specific clan and village. When lepers recovered from their disease, they had to go through elaborate rites of purification .

Social ramifications of leprosy: The description of leprosy that is given in the first reading does not seem to be what we moderns call leprosy or Hansen’s disease. It seems to be some breaking out or eruption of the skin. But leprosy was seen as a social disorder. The skin had broken out because the person had “broken out” or misused power in some way. Israel’s society strove for an ordered way of living and leprosy was a sign the person had violated the proper order of things. It was feared that such “break outs” would rent the very order of society and so such persons must be banished for the welfare of the whole. When leprosy’s symptoms first appears, Leviticus tells us, the priest is to be consulted to examine the person. Don C., Benjamin, O’Carm. in, THE COLLEGEVILLE PASTORAL DICTIONARY (page 551) says that a “cure” for leprosy was humility. So, confirmed lepers went through a seven-day period of ritual degradation. They dressed like corpses in shrouds and did not cut their hair. After these symptoms subsided and they were willing to accept their proper place in the community, they were allowed once again to live among the people. In effect, they had been reborn into the community. (Remember Naaman the leper, who had to accept Elisha’s seeming foolish order to bath seven times in the Jordan? An important person of the nation that had conquered Israel, had to do the degrading task of following orders from a prophet of the defeated people. He followed the seeming foolish

orders and was cured.)

Maybe one reason Jesus responded the leper in today's Gospel story is that he identified in some way with the man's condition. Jesus too would be an outcast from his family and people. He will, in effect, be declared "unclean" and cast out of the city to be executed. When he is "examined" by the priests, he is found unclean, not a true member of the people's religion. Just as the lepers dressed like corpses in their "treatments," ritually dying and being reborn, so Christ dies, is wrapped in a shroud and is reborn to a new life, with a new community of believers gathered around him. Jesus cures the leper with a word and a touch. In other miracles a word is sufficient for a cure. But Jesus does the unthinkable, he touches the leper, making himself ritually unclean along with the leper. Jesus is "touched" by the leper's need, but Jesus too is like the leper and the touch identifies him with all lepers.

Jesus cures the leper and in so doing, enables the man to return to membership in the community. His return to others is shown by the fact that he publicizes his cure to others, he "spread it aboard." The man's cure enables him to get close to others, close enough to tell them about Jesus. The former leper is no longer kept out, he is allowed back into the community, and his words are even accepted. The cure made a new person of the leper, one recognized and listened to by the people who once had expelled him. However, the man's spreading the news of his cure was contrary to Jesus' order, for Jesus wanted the cure to be first acknowledged by the religious authorities. It seems he didn't want to break with their religious tradition. As a result of the man's testimony, Jesus will take on the former leper's condition, for more and more Jesus will be expelled by his own.

Any superficial blemish or rash might get someone ostracized as a leper in Jesus' time. How a person looked was a sign of their interior disposition. They were judged as being less based on what people saw. Is our society so very different after all? Is this really a story from "far away and long ago?" I was standing at the checkout line of our local supermarket the other day looking at the magazine covers next to me. One certainly could get an inferiority complex looking at all those young, attractive and trim models and superstars. None of us on the line came anywhere close to looking like them. We are the fat, short, pimply, aging, bald and people with "bad hair days." A woman told me recently that since she passed 40 the bank tellers don't even notice her. They keep looking over her shoulder at younger women on the line while they handle her money. In our

society, to paraphrase Vince Lombardi, “looks aren’t everything, they are the only thing.”

Tomorrow is Valentine’s Day. Wouldn’t you have chosen more “appropriate” readings for this day before Valentine’s Day? What about the one from Chapter 13 in I Corinthians, “love is.....”? I hear it at every wedding. Instead, we get Leviticus’ rules and regulations about lepers and Jesus reaching out to touch one—ugh! Not the stuff of Hallmark sentiments is it? Jesus’ love, exhibited in today’s miracle, offers us something different from the usual way we are treated and judged. We are accepted, not because our skin is perfect or our spirits unblemished, but because he has entered our condition and reaches out to touch and heal us. He is doing that at this Eucharist, here he touches us, making us clean and acceptable to God, restoring us to healed relationships with one another.

I notice these days how many people hug when greeting one another. I particularly notice it among men. It’s far from universal, but it is done much more than when I was young. Men used to shake hands, now we give each other a hug, men and women. It’s easier to hug someone we are close to; someone we have known for a long time. There are lots of people who never get touched much less hugged: my friend Henry, for example, on death row here in Raleigh. He and I are separated by a thick, impenetrable plexiglass partition. We can’t even shake hands when we visit. Older people say they don’t get touched as much as they used to by friends and family members. Are we put off by touching hands that are twisted with arthritis, blemished by bulging veins or overly dry and wrinkled? I was moved by a story of Cardinal O’Connor of New York. Seems that in earlier days he was rather confrontative, some found him a tough negotiator. Now he has a brain tumor and is bloated and misshaped by chemotherapy. His photos seem to be of another person. He is much weakened and has trouble walking up the altar steps. In his new condition he also goes to AIDS wards and bathes and feeds the sick there. They touch each other, when prior there were a lot of harsh words spoken between him and them.

There are people we avoid touching in other ways. We church workers and volunteers tend to steer clear of teenagers. It’s hard to get people to work among them. Their awkward stage of development makes a lot of us uncomfortable.

Finally, here is a story from a recent “Catholic Worker” newspaper article. Colman Mc Carthy reports on the death from cancer of Michael Kirwan, a longtime

member of the Catholic Worker community in Washington, D.C. Colman quotes a story by Kirwan that tells how he first began his life's mission of feeding and caring for the homeless. Catch the leper tale here:

"One night as I brought down a large gallon jug of split pea soup and set it down on the cement block near the heating vent where they gathered, a rather rough looking fellow picked up the jar of soup and, in one motion, broke the jar over my head....

"Instead of running away, I asked the man why he had done that. These were probably the first words I had ever spoken to any of them. He told me I was doing nothing more than bringing food to the dogs. I was bringing food, setting it down like I was feeding them out of a pet dish and then just walking away. He said, 'Talk to us. Visit us. We don't bite.'"

Michael did begin visiting. "What happened that night, he said, 'was that a first barrier had been broken in my perceptions of who homeless people are. I realized that these men and women on the street had feelings, just like me. They wanted to be loved and respected and listened to. They cared that someone cared about them, but just giving food and a blanket was not enough.'"

"It is community and in community that we find love, and in love there is no ending," was his constant message.

-----Colman Mc Carthy in, THE LITTLE WAY: DOROTHY DAY CATHOLIC WORKER, Vol. 17, no.3, Fall 1999, page 3

#### FEEDBACK FROM A PREACHER:

Thanks for the first impressions on suffering. It reminded me of a little schema I used in training lay leaders in the Philippines. Jesus came to remove evil from the world, and we are invited to do the same.

Evil	Response
Sin (Moral evil)	Forgiveness
Suffering (Physical evil)	Healing
Ignorance	Teaching the truth
Natural disasters	Calming the wind and sea
Hunger	Feeding the multitudes
Possession	Expelling
Death	Resurrection
Sexism	Accepting women

And there is possibly a few more I haven't listed. John Rich

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

*Jude Siciliano, OP*

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