

Homily for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I don't know how much you know about leprosy. I really didn't know a whole lot about it, so I decided to do a little research. Of course you can google it, and You Tube really has some heart-wrenching videos. Medically-speaking, leprosy is an actual illness now referred to as Hansen's disease. It's caused by a type of bacteria; but only 5% of people infected actually develop the disease. Because the bacteria that cause leprosy thrive in cool areas of the body, such as the skin, it can lead to severe deformity of the feet, hands and face. Fortunately, it's been curable since the 1940s, and people treated are no longer contagious.

For the Israelites of Old Testament times, leprosy was a disease that would render a person "unclean". Now, to be unclean didn't mean being physically dirty or anything like that. Rather, it was a religious sort of uncleanness – meaning, they weren't fit to worship the all-pure God. It also meant they weren't permitted to be associated with the larger community either. So, rules were set up to quarantine lepers. First, a temple priest would diagnose a person as unclean due to leprosy. Then, the "infected" person would be forced to dwell outside the community, living as though they were in the wild. They would wear ragged clothes, and, as we hear in our first reading today, had to warn passers-by that they were unclean, so that others would not contact them and thus become unclean themselves. It was hoped somehow that these people would eventually be cured. But in the meantime, they lived a life of profound abandonment and isolation.

In our Gospel today, Jesus was approached by a man with leprosy. Now, notice right away that Jesus didn't turn and run away from this unclean person. And He didn't say, "Get away from me you leper!" Rather, He allowed the man, wounded by this disease and its resultant loneliness, to come closer. And Jesus listened to his prayer for healing – "If you wish, you can make me clean", the man said. In response, Jesus then stretched out His hand, touched the man, and he was instantly cured of his leprosy. A real miracle!

But, did you ever wonder: Why did Jesus perform such miracles? I mean, as the only-begotten Son of God, He was sent by the Father to save us from our sins – to pay the price for us upon the cross at Calvary. That was His mission. So, why did He "stop along the way" so to speak to miraculously heal people? Was He just trying to be kind and compassionate to those in need? Was He trying to show everyone what power He possessed? What were these miracles all about?

As the Divine Physician, Jesus came to save us from our sins – to heal our spiritual brokenness and disease. And yet, He performed these miracles "along the way" to show in a visible and obvious way that God was indeed working in Him and through Him. And if Jesus could cure physical illness by the power of God alive in Him, so too was He able to heal deadly sin, which God alone could forgive. Such miracles then prove Jesus' ability to really heal – not just the body, which everyone could see – but even more the soul, which is visible to God alone.

My brothers and sisters, this is why Jesus really healed this man with leprosy. Not merely because He wanted to alleviate the suffering of one person, but even more because He wanted to show us that we are all much more like that man than we might ever care to admit. In a way, we are all spiritual lepers. Sin makes us unclean before God – unable to enter into the presence of such light, and goodness and truth. And perhaps your sins have caused you to really feel unclean before. Maybe you thought: “Because I’ve committed that sin, I’m dirty – forever. God can never forgive me. And if anyone knew, they’d treat me just like that leper.” And for those who live with such thoughts, it’s very easy for them to wander around feeling isolated from others, from God – even from themselves. And yet, Jesus wants us to approach Him – not with the fear that He might treat us like the Israelite community treated the lepers – but with the confidence and faith that He can really heal us.

And this is what the man with leprosy teaches us. We don’t have to be afraid to come to Jesus as we are – even ragged, worn-down, and feeling unclean. We don’t have to first make ourselves all presentable to God, and be “good enough” before we’re worthy. My friends, church is not for those who have it all together, but for those who need a Divine Physician to heal them. Jesus wants us to just come to Him in prayer as we are. He wants to heal us of all that keeps us from His Father’s eternal love. If you think that just can’t be true for me, then I encourage you this week to go to Jesus in prayer, and just ask Him to heal you – to clean you of all that makes you feel shameful, or dirty, or unworthy. And allow Jesus to say personally to you – because He truly wants to – “I do will it; be made clean”. God bless you.