

Gospel Verse  
Sunday, February 15, 2009  
(8:30 AM Mass)

"A Leper came to Jesus and kneeling down begged him and said, 'If you wish, you can make me clean.' Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, 'I do will it. Be made clean.'"

■ Mark 1:40-41

What do you do with those who are unclean? Those who are outside of the community because we are so afraid that if we get close to them, whatever their disease is, we're going to get it. Then it was called Leprosy. Today we call it Hansen's disease. It's not quite as contagious as everybody thought it was. But anything that's outside, we're afraid we're going to catch. So we stay out distance.

One time when I was a camp counselor at Camp Richards up in East Troy, Wisconsin, they had a whole bunch of kids over there, and the missionaries ran the camp. There was an outbreak of impetigo which is a disease from things not being as clean as they should be. And there's little sores around the mouth and face. And, of course, some of the kids got it and some of the counselor's got it. They had to have their own little dining room where they were separated from the other kids. And whenever somebody came by, one of the counselor's would shout out, 'Unclean. Unclean. Get out of here. Go away.' Until we all became clean, we weren't able to join the community.

What is it like to be outside of the community, to be unclean, to live on the edge? In days of Jesus, and in days of today, if you are outside of the Tribe, outside of the family, outside of the community, you have no existence. You have no rights, no life, you are left out. So, the leper today comes up to Jesus feeling terribly left out. We are talking today, not just about the leper in Jesus' time, but the lepers of our times as well. It's not just Hansen's disease that we're discussing or that Jesus is trying to teach us about today, it's about how we respond to anybody on the edges.

It wasn't too many years ago when we wouldn't even talk about the word 'cancer'. We would use euphemisms for the word. We called it the Big C. I heard many stories, when people got cancer, their friends would stop seeing them and they would start getting distance between them even though it's not a contagious disease. Somehow it's being around them that made us feel a little 'not whole'.

There's all kinds of 'cancers' in our society today. Some are physical, some are emotional. Many people are petrified of anybody with a mental illness. They shy away from people they don't understand or who don't seem to understand us. We're afraid if we get too close, we'll catch it. Or, the same for physical sicknesses.

I remember the early days of Aids. No one wanted to work with an Aid's patient. Why? Because when you are in solidarity with somebody who's on the outside, even if you don't take on their disease, you may be one of them – one of *those* people. So you keep your distance. You stay away. I remember one young man dying of aids in the early 1980s. I asked him what was the hardest part? He said, 'Father, no one will talk to me. My family won't visit me.'

Jesus comes across one who has Aids, one who is a leper. He is an outsider. And he cries out, 'Lord, have pity on me. If you can, you will cure me.' Then Mark says that Jesus felt his pain. Not in the way that our former president may have felt our pain. Jesus - felt – his – pain from the depth of his bowels. From his very very gut he experienced what this man was going through. The Latin word for this is *Compassio* – Compassion – Feel with.

There's a wonderful movie called 'Powder' many years ago of a young boy with special powers where he can feel everything that was going on in everybody else's life. There was a policeman who took the boys hunting one day and shot a deer. And the boy grabbed the policeman and grabbed the deer and all of a sudden he became the conduit between the dying deer and the policeman. And he felt the pain of the

dying deer. He said he could never handle a gun or shoot anybody anymore because now he knew. That's compassio. That's compassion.

Jesus felt the pain of the world. And when you identify with that kind of pain, in solidarity with that kind of pain, you lose yourself and then do what you may not do. Jesus was not allowed to touch anybody with leprosy. He was about to become unclean. He was about to enter the world he was not allowed to go. But, the compassion was so strong that he touched him and made him whole. It was after that that he said, 'Don't tell anybody'. He told him that for two reasons – He did not want people to come to him just for healing. Every healing that Jesus performs in the Gospels isn't just for the sake of healing. It's for the sake of taking us to a different place. Because after showing compassion for this leper, he is hoping that this leper will now show compassion for others. The other reason was because he was now part of this community. Because how he was unclean. He had touched lepers and that's who he was in solidarity with. He made him whole.

I honestly believe there's great healing going on in the world today. Healing is not the hard part. The hard part is feeling compassion. We don't want to get involved. There's an accident on the street and we roll up the windows and look the other way. Let's not get involved. Why? Because it's painful. It hurts. And we feel that if we look the other way we will not get involved and we will live in our own nice little world.

It's happening today with many who are experiencing economic leprosy. Those who were on the pinnacle now are losing everything. And many are pulling away from them because they are afraid economic leprosy may be contagious as well. Let's not get involved. The other part of that equation is, now we are willing to feel the pain, to reach out and touch. Touch the untouchable. Touch those who are living in PADS and the homeless people. Touch those who nobody wants to speak to.

I often share with adolescent girls who are so afraid to get near or touch the girl that everybody shuns and makes fun of and puts down. She's alone and feeling isolated. If we could just feel what she feels and touch her. That's what Jesus does. He heals the world. We're so afraid of touch.

There's a story from 1969 when a little boy came to school and he bruised his knee. The teacher picked him up and washed the knee and hugged him and kissed him. Today, if a boy comes to a teacher with a bruised knee, she'll antiseptically clean it, but God forbid she touch him or kiss him. It's the world in which we live today. We are taught to be afraid and stay our distance. No matter how it may be in our world today, it's not the Gospel.

The Gospel isn't cheap. There's no cheap grace. There will be a price to pay for solidarity with the poor or the leper or the forgotten or the outsider. But, when we are willing to pay that price, there's healing.

It is the will of the Father that all be healed.