

## Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46

Psalm 31

1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1

Mark 1:40-45

Given that I have grown up in an age and a society in which you are not likely to ever meet someone with leprosy, whenever I heard this and similar Gospel passages about the healing of lepers I would need to use my imagination to picture the social dynamics at play with a disease like that as an ever-present risk. Well, suffice to say, after the past few years, I no longer need to use my imagination.

It's been four years now since the initial COVID outbreak, and Lord knows there's been plenty of politics since then surrounding lockdowns, vaccines, and so forth – but cast your mind back if you would to the initial outbreak, when we had no idea how deadly or infectious this disease would be, when we saw images of people dying in hospital corridors for lack of beds, and major cities looking like ghost towns. Recall the collective fear and anxiety, the shuffling away from others, the suspicious glances, the run on toilet paper. Recall the constant hand-washing, the disinfecting, the facemasks, the contact tracing, the conspiracy theories.

And with this in mind, the behaviour mandated for those with leprosy in our first reading from the book of Leviticus no longer seems that far-fetched. With some minor tweaks it could have been written for 2020:

“A man infected with COVID must separate himself from his neighbours, shield his face, and cry, “Unclean, unclean.” As long as the disease lasts he must be declared unclean; and therefore he must live apart: he must live outside the camp.”

For the leper in our Gospel passage, the physical pain of his affliction was magnified by the emotional anguish of being *untouchable*. And it is no coincidence that, when Jesus healed him, it was not done simply with words. To heal the leper, Jesus stretched out his hand, *and touched him*. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. Imagine the gasps if Jesus was at one of our quarantine hotels in 2020, and he reached out and touched someone with COVID. Most people would have scurried back in fear, and understandably so. Looking back, I suspect that one of the biggest things we suffered from during the height of the lockdowns was the lack of human touch.

The healing power of touch has been well documented. For instance, a few years back I remember seeing an amazing photo that was doing the rounds. A pair of twin sisters were born several weeks premature, and one of the sisters was struggling far more than the other and seemed headed for certain death. In a last-ditch effort, the doctors decided to put the healthy girl in the same incubator as her dying sister, and as

she lay next to her something remarkable happened. The healthy baby reached out and put her tiny arm around her sister, and they laid there together. And to the amazement of the medical team, the struggling sister soon began to display a dramatic improvement. It was as if the loving embrace of her twin sister gave the dying girl the strength she needed to fight on, and—to the delight of their parents—she was eventually able to make a full recovery. The image of this sisterly embrace would capture hearts around the world, and it was a breath-taking instance of the healing power of touch.

When Jesus touched the leper, he not only cured his leprosy, he also cured his “untouchableness”. Keep in mind that such an action made Jesus ritually unclean in the eyes of the Levitical purity code, to say nothing of the perceived risk of infection. It was a gesture of acceptance and solidarity with a social outcast, and Jesus certainly knew a thing or two about being an outcast.

As for the leper, he had shown great faith in making his request to the Lord. He not only asked to be healed, he declared his faith that this was something that Jesus could do if it was his will. In this, the leper is a great witness for us – for we all have our own scars that need to be healed. Perhaps it’s a sin that we’ve struggled with for a long time – maybe an addiction of some kind. Perhaps it’s a hurt that we’ve carried for years, or the pain of a difficult family relationship. Perhaps there is a bitterness in our soul that we can’t shake, or a jealousy that we seldom admit and wish wasn’t there.

We are told that Jesus can heal us. The thing is, do we really believe that he can? Do we really believe that he wants to? Even the leper framed his request by saying, “*If you want too, you can heal me.*” And what did Jesus say? “Of course I want to!” Beautiful. Of course, there is a need for this faith on our part, because Jesus will not force himself upon us, because love can’t be forced. He waits for our invitation. He waits for us to acknowledge our need, to believe he can heal us, and to ask him to do it.

And what about the physical touch with which Jesus cured the leper – what is to be our avenue for receiving this? Well, I submit to you that the Eucharist we are about to receive is pretty good avenue for the Lord to touch us in both body and spirit. Indeed, what could be more intimate than receiving Jesus into our very bodies? In receiving the Holy Eucharist we receive the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord into our very flesh.

This an immense privilege: to be touched by the Lord *from the inside*. And in consuming him, we are in turn consumed by his love, and our human hearts are enveloped in the embrace of his most Sacred Heart.

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This theme of receiving the Lord's healing is a timely lead-in to the season of Lent, which begins this coming Wednesday.

Lent is not—as the stereotype would have it—simply a time for us to feel bad for forty days, but it is a necessary time of preparation and purification in order for us to be ready to truly encounter the Risen Christ at Easter, and to receive anew the call he has for each of us. I've often spoken of the genius of this liturgical season – that if we enter seriously into Lent and Holy Week, we can't help but be swimming with joy come Easter Sunday.

Realising the magnitude of sin and our inclination towards it is not about making us discouraged, but about helping us truly know our need of God, so that we may accept the gift of Lord's forgiveness, and allow ourselves to be transformed. Therefore, our Lenten disciplines are not about trying to earn God's love by being hardcore. Rather, they are intended to instil in us the disposition we need in order to encounter the Lord with humble honesty. So allow me offer some brief advice as you prepare your own Lenten disciplines this year.

The main thing I always say is that you don't have to try to do too much, or to reinvent the wheel. There are a number of time-tested Lenten traditions that you can draw from. These include:

- Abstaining from meat on Fridays.
- Attending the Stations of the Cross on Fridays, or if you can't make it at the parish time, to pray the Stations by yourself at some point during the day.
- Meditating on the Passion and death of Our Lord. Perhaps prayerfully read one of the Gospel accounts of the Passion each week, or some devotional writings on the Passion by one of the saints.
- Look for small opportunities to be charitable. Let people in in traffic. Allow others to go before you at the work coffee machine.
- Be careful with penances such as giving up coffee or cigarettes – make sure that you don't make life miserable for the people around you. It's meant to be your penance, not theirs!
- Find small ways to help the poor, both the materially poor and the poor in spirit.
- And make special use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The Lord's grace in this sacrament offers us powerful healing, and it's a fitting way to prepare ourselves for the mysteries of Holy Week.

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As Gandalf once said to Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.” Well, in his goodness, God has given us this Mass, and the coming season of Lent. So let us use this time to pray for healing for everyone suffering at present, offering up our own struggles for the healing of those most in need of it. And as we encounter our Lord once more in this

morning/evening's Eucharist, may his mercy console us and strengthen us to go forth from here to serve as his instruments of peace and goodness in our hurting world.

And let us pray for each other as we begin once more this great preparation for Easter, that we may each be open to the graces that the Lord wants to offer us, and so that we may be able to accept his call when we meet him face to face.