

6th Sunday of OT: Yr. B – 2021

[Lv 13:1-2, 44-46; 1 Cor 10:31—11:1; Mk 1:40-45]

Whenever I heard about leprosy as a child I thought, “*Yuck, leprosy is that disease that rots away skin and limbs. I don’t want to catch that!*” In fact my sensitivity to leprosy was not much different than an ancient Jew’s. The first reading from Leviticus states, “*The one who bears the sore of leprosy ... shall cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’ He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp.*” Did ancient peoples overreact to diseases they feared and did not understand? Of course and so do we. Just replace the word ‘leprosy’ with ‘Covid-19’ and see if our fear and overreaction towards infected people is much different today.

If we cannot cure a disease, then we physically isolate people. In ancient Israel, the leper was also spiritually isolated from worshipping God at the temple. If we think of leprosy in the spiritual sense, then mortal sin is an infection that tends to isolate us from God and Godly things. Think of Adam and Eve when they were infected with sin. They hid from God behind a bush. Or St. Peter, when Jesus stepped into his boat and Peter dropped to his knees saying, “*Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.*” Or Zacchaeus keeping a safe distance from Jesus by climbing a tree. Being isolated and unclean spiritually is a symptom of sin that needs to be healed.

In fact when we stay away from healing by hiding our sin, we are playing into the hands of the enemy, according to St. Ignatius of Loyola. He said the Devil desires that his words and temptations be received and kept secret. The only way to defeat the enemy is to bring our spiritual leprosy or sin to the light of confession. Looking at sin as an addiction we can take a hint from the Alcoholics Anonymous handbook: “*We are only as sick as our secrets.*” The leper broke free from his sickness when he courageously approached Jesus. If the leper had dwelt on the shame of the disease he would still be isolated and ill.

Hasn’t that always been the lie of the enemy, that if we sinners show our self to God and admit our wrongs we will experience shame? But remember God’s action in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve covered their sin and shame with fig leaves. It is curious that the Book of Genesis said that God in his compassion made them suitable clothing out of leather. Fig leaf fashion describes the limits of what we can do for ourselves when it comes to dealing with sin – we can try to cover over sin, ignore it, justify it, or escape it with earthy distractions. The leather garments represent all that God can do for us. Jesus clothes us with his grace first in the waters of baptism and later with healing in the sacrament of confession.

What do we have to be scared of? We know medically how to handle leprosy now, but how about sin? Is there a medicine or therapy for that? Yes, for Jesus said to his Apostles, “*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.*” To receive this free gift of healing we must follow our Lord’s command in the gospel, “*Go, show yourself to the priest ...*” The role of a priest is to be a soul doctor - we inspect wounds, recommend treatment, and bandage souls with Jesus’ sacramental grace. How would we ever physically get better if we hid our symptoms from our doctor? An old Italian proverb wisely says, “*From your doctor, lawyer, and confessor, hide nothing.*”

No matter how repulsive our sins are, Christ will never say, “*Yuck! Keep your distance!*” If Christ was repulsed by our human condition he would have ran away from the leper. If Jesus was uncomfortable with the stench of sin and death, why did he wait four days before entering Lazarus’s tomb? Christ came to heal souls and he left us the sacrament of confession to do just that. Have the courage to reach for the remedy like the leper. For St. Francis de Sales said, “*Never let your soul remain long infected by sin since you have a remedy so near at hand and so easy to apply.*”