

Sixth Sunday – February 15, 2015

Maybe our first reading today from the Old Testament book of Leviticus should have been prefaced by a warning like this: “The following contains graphic material and may be offensive to some of our more sensitive listeners.” At the very least we could say that this Scripture selection from Leviticus is not recommended for after-Mass discussion at Sunday brunch. We are given this text only because it sets the scene for today’s gospel where Jesus deals with a person affected by the worst disease imaginable.

First, some background. Moses and his friends lived centuries before the discovery of bacteria and germ theory. Leprosy was understood more in cultic-religious terms than as a medical problem. In fact, “leprosy” was a broad term referring to many skin problems, even to something as ordinary as eczema or acne. Thus, the leper was not so much considered ill, but unclean in a religious sense: contaminating and repulsive to others. The leper had to be marginalized; the community had to be protected; no human contact was possible. Such was the situation of the leper of whom we hear in Mark’s gospel. Since it was believed that only God could heal someone of the impurity of leprosy, and until the priest certified that the healing had taken place, the victim had to be isolated lest others be contaminated. Enter Jesus.

Notice first that the man approached Jesus and said, “If you wish, you can make me clean.” These words were a proclamation of faith. The leper believes somehow that Jesus could choose to wield divine power. We might ask why the man says, “If you wish.” Maybe this man has prayed for healing and not found an answer. So he’s calling on Jesus and asking for compassion, all the while recognizing his own powerlessness.

Jesus reaches out and touches him. Oh, horrors! Such a touch, in the wisdom of the day, would make Jesus unclean. In reality, the opposite was true. That touch cleansed and healed. By touching the man, Jesus broke the barrier of isolation that had trapped him. Not only that, Jesus stripped the taboo of its power and subverted the conventional wisdom of his day. The one standing before Jesus was a person who had leprosy, not a leprous creature. The privacy of the person over any consideration of physical condition, nationality, or gender is now manifest in the perfect loving freedom of Jesus.

While this gospel may trigger many transforming insights for us, let me suggest just two angles of approach.

First, I believe that this gospel invites us to enter into the mysteries of our own disabilities, hidden or otherwise. Maybe there are moments when we fear being secret lepers ourselves. Aren’t there parts of our lives we hide away and want to keep locked up? We need not fear our failures and sins, our vanities and deceptions, our jealousies and fakery. Jesus will reach out and touch us even there. All of us are vulnerable and frail and handicapped in some way. It’s just that some can pretend better than others.

Second, if some doubt persists that Jesus can heal the likes of me and you, consider this. As the story of the gospel begins, Jesus could move about freely, while the leper was ostracized. By the end of the story, the situation is reversed. The leper went off to be welcomed by the community, while Jesus found it impossible to enter a town openly. Jesus had taken the leper’s place. How about “dem” apples?