

February 11, 2018 – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in ordinary time

Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. A day of fasting and abstinence, no meat and very little food. Masses with ashes will be 8:30 in the morning and 7 p.m. in the evening. Don't forget. Don't be pulling up to McDonalds or whatever and getting into your routine again. If you do, order the fish sandwich. That was invented by a Catholic. He had such a large Catholic population in the area where his McDonald's was, he decided, "You know what? I'm losing business on Friday's, I'm going to have a fish sandwich." McDonald's loved it so much, they put it on the menu throughout the whole world. So, McDonald's owes their fish sandwich to Catholics.

Our first reading for today, was about leprosy, just like today's gospel is. Leprosy has many forms. We think of only Hansen's Disease, where body parts rot off and puss and all that good stuff comes out. A deacon up in my brothers' parish was from Fiji. This deacon, Deacon David, has the real leprosy. He is on medication to slow it down. But, every once in a while, he has to go in and have the skin removed from his fingers and hands or lose a finger, because of this. It's a very nasty disease. But, in the time of Jesus and before, (because Hansen's Disease did not get to the Holy Land until after the first century A.D.) what they were talking about, when we read it in scripture is any kind of skin affliction. A bad case of acne, ring worm, eczema, psoriasis, all that good stuff, even shingles. People dressed from head to toe. We see in our first reading that he has to present himself or she has to present herself to the priest if something comes on their head, because that's the only part people saw. They can keep it a secret under their garments, but once it manifested itself on their face, then they had to go and show themselves to the priest. The priest was both worship leader and doctor at the same time. The reason they did this, was once again, God is wise, to prevent spread of disease. Leprosy exists other ways too. There's this physical leprosy, there's spiritual leprosy, and there's cultural leprosy. We're going to talk about that. The problem with leprosy was, what it did to the person. The person would be ostracized, immediately. Kicked out of the house, kicked out of their family, kicked out of the community, their support group, and sent to live in the desert outside the village. Many of them lived in caves. They had to tear their clothes into shreds and they had to uncover their head. Everybody walked around with their head covered out of modesty and to keep the heat off your head, the sun. They had to have something off their head. When they came out of their cave and started walking around, they had to say, "unclean, unclean." The disease separated them not only from family and community, but from God. They were not allowed to worship in the synagogues or the Temple. It separated them everything. They became sub-human, not human. It was a very horrible disease for what it did. It made life almost unbearable. If they had family that still cared and had hope that eventually they would be cured, they would leave pots of food out on a rock and the person, after they left, could come out and eat. Otherwise, they had to forage in the trash heaps around the villages. The dignity of the human being was taken away; just shredded. We see something else happening in the gospel. You have to realize, if a leper that was unclean, came up to a person and didn't say anything; the penalty was death by stoning. You had to stay away from everyone that was clean, that did not have the disease.

In today's gospel, the first sentence, "a leper approached Jesus." The leper is inviting the death sentence, but he sees who Jesus really is. One of the few individuals in the stories in the gospel that actually see who Jesus is. So, he is willing to take that chance. He comes up to Jesus, and he says, "If you wish, you can make me clean, you can heal me." He doesn't say, "oh, if you think you can, oh, if you want to, he said, "if you wish." Not my will be done but Your will be done. He knows he is talking to God. That's a very good thing to say. "God, if you wish, Your will not mine be done." Jesus is moved with pity.

When Jesus is moved with pity, good things happen. Bartimaeus the blind man, gets his sight back. Moved with pity, the girl is raised from the dead. Moved with pity, the people are fed; thousands of people are fed off of seven pieces of bread. When Jesus is moved with pity, good things happen. Jesus has pity because he hates disease and death. It is the result of sin being brought into the world. God does not like that. So, Jesus has pity on the man. He also realizes, this man has faith because he's kneeling down. This is not a Jewish position of prayer. This is a Jewish position of begging, or humility. Only two other times do people kneel before Jesus. One, the rich young man who wants to go to heaven but can't get rid of his possessions and goes away sad. Two, the soulders who are beating up Christ in His passion and kneel down to mock Him. Out of the three instances it happens, only this guy is sincere, only this guy has true faith. So, he's made clean. That's what the sentence says. But, what happens when he's made clean? His family ties are restored, his community ties are restored, he can go back home and live, he can go to the temple and worship and praise God. Saint Paul says, "give glory to God in everything." That's what this leper did. Jesus tells him not to tell anyone. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus said that a lot. "Keep it to yourself, don't tell anyone." That's like telling someone, "Hey, wet paint – do not touch." What are you going to do? You're going to touch it. If you tell people, "this is dry paint" there's no interest. It's like if you put your old recliner out on the sidewalk and you say, "free." Nobody takes it. But, if you say, "For sale – ten bucks," it's gone instantly. Fake them out. The greatest case I ever heard was; during one of the New York garbage strikes, a guy on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue got tired of having garbage in his house, he went out and got a big old box, put all the garbage in it, taped it shut, wrapped it with wrapping paper, put a bow on it, and stuck it in the front seat of his car and left the window down. When he came out, it was gone. Jesus is saying, "Don't tell anyone." Well, what's he going to do? He's going to tell everybody. Why, because God has restored him to human being status. He's not going to keep that quiet. He's going to tell everyone. And what happens? Jesus is made a leper. He can no longer enter the towns where He's at; He has to stay in the desert, He becomes a leper of another kind. But still, the people come to Him. They're not afraid now. They're not worried, Jesus' is not worried about being made "unclean" by touching them.

That's another thing. How did Jesus cure the man? He touched him. Untouchables, they were called, and Jesus touches him. God brings touch. Human beings are people that have skin and the greatest sense organ is their skin. We need to be touched. Babies that are not touched when they are born, soon die. Studies carried out by the Russians during the KGB era. We found that out. You have to be touched to be healthy, to be whole. People that say, "Don't touch me." They are like Scrooge, they are like, "Get away, I'm going to be mentally ill." So, He touched him. God wants to touch all of us. God wants to do that. Saint Frances of Assisi was terrified of leprosy; absolutely terrified. So, one day, he's going down the road, and this man comes out of the bushes. Because in his time, in the 1100's, people with leprosy still had to live outside the cities and towns. This guy comes out; half his face is missing, puss is dripping off, he's got hands falling apart. All of a sudden Saint Francis realizes something. Jesus is in the person in front of us. He walks up, he hugs the man, he kisses him, right on the face. Instantly he has the grace of God that he needs to keep going. Father Damien Molokai went to Hawaii to help the leper colony and when his work permit ran out, he became an illegal alien in Hawaii. He told the officials, "If you want me, come and get me." He was living in a leper colony: nobody could touch him. They didn't want to. He started building schools and hospitals and bringing dignity to the people. While he was ministering to their needs, and their sicknesses, and their health, and putting on bandages: he caught it himself. Now he's a saint because of what he's done. Some people recognized the dignity that's still there and Jesus did too.

There was a young parish priest who was so paranoid about leprosy after going to scripture studies in the seminary. He was all the time, pinching his arms and pinching his legs because that's where it starts. You lose your feeling and it becomes numb. He would just all of a sudden start pinching himself to make sure he didn't have leprosy. One night at a dinner party, he's sitting at the table and he feels the need to test his legs. He reaches down and pinches his leg: he can't feel anything. He's scared now. Five minutes later, he reaches down, he pinches his leg again. He still doesn't feel anything. He makes an involuntary gasp and says, "Oh no." His host says, "what's wrong?" "I think I have leprosy," he said. "I just pinched my leg and I can't feel it." And the beautiful young lady next to him said, "that's my leg you're pinching."

There is leprosy that is physical. Jesus had spiritual leprosy because he was left out of town because they found out who He was. There is cultural leprosy. Cultural leprosy is when we decide ourselves, who is worthy and who is not worthy. Who is worthy of respect: who is not worthy of respect. Who is worthy of love: who is not worthy of love. Based on skin color, based on culture, based on language, based on gender: who is not worthy of love. God loves all of us. Yes, it's our actions that get us into trouble. Cultural leprosy is when we decide to become God and say, "That person does' not deserve this, that person doesn't need this. I'm going to disrespect that person." That's cultural leprosy. The people came to Jesus even though He touched a leper. Even though He was made "unclean" in the eyes of the religious figures. People came to Him, why? Because Jesus was open to everybody being made "whole" and healed. Not just this group, not just that group, but everyone. Jesus is why we are Christians, because of love. Jesus is open to all and when we forget that, we are creating lepers of another kind. Saint Paul says, "Give glory to God in everything," in our second reading. Be positive. Spread the news like the leper did. Jesus is Lord and King. Jesus is Savior. Jesus is Healer, so that all this leprosy disappears. But more than that. People are drawn to Him, just like they were in the gospel. He is opening His arms and saying, "Let all the children come to Me."

God bless you