

**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year [B] 2024** (Lial, OSF and Lourdes U)

(Pope Francis at Angelus this morning reminded us that today's feast of Our Lady of Lourdes is also the World Day of Prayer for the sick. And that we need to heal broken relationships...)

In this gospel we hear one of several stories about Jesus curing leprosy, the most famous, of course, was the cure of the 10 and only one coming back to give thanks. In the time of Jesus, leprosy was thought to be a punishment from God for having committed sins against Him. Lepers were considered to be unclean, not just because of the disease, but what people believed *caused* their disease, their sins. So they were shunned by the rest of the community.

I wonder how long this man, the leper, had hidden himself? It must have seemed like a lifetime. Always ringing a bell, shouting "Unclean! Unclean!" so that no people would come near him. He was a carrier of a contagion, worse than COVID, I suspect. And worse than the disease was *the loneliness*. Oh, he could associate with those afflicted with the same disease, but the shroud of loneliness enveloped him when he saw normal people laughing, dancing, picnicking, shopping, going to Temple in crowds he could never join.

Then he heard that the Nazarene was in the area, the healer. So he made his way to Jesus, stealthily, like a thief. He knew people would try to chase him away, throw stones at him. But nothing ventured, nothing gained. Strange though, the people parted like the Red Sea and allowed him to approach Jesus. Maybe they, too, had been healed.

But he never expected what happened next! There was a collective gasp from the crowd. Jesus actually touched him! No one had touched him for years. It was as if the rabbi was sending a signal: We are brothers. And his leprosy disappeared like dirt washed away in the village pool, like sins cleansed in the Jordan River. Jesus healed him, and restored him to life—life with *people*: family, friends, even strangers!

I think there was much to this poor man, who had suffered so excruciatingly—qualities we might all emulate: courage, hope and trust, yet a human who cannot keep a secret! Can you imagine the courage and humility of this man with the leprosy? He took the risk of being scorned, or worse, pelted with rocks for approaching Jesus and his companions, and yet he did it. How difficult can it be for **us** to risk the scorn or ridicule of others when we take a moral stand which goes against many people in our society? We can all use a dose of this man's courage.

Then he falls to his knees and literally begs Jesus to grant his desire to be healed. How many of us would have the humility to beg for God's cleansing grace in such a public way? This man approaches Jesus with total assurance that he will cure him. That hope and trust in God's healing is difficult to match.

This man teaches us some beautiful lessons in his interaction with Jesus, but he is also very human. Jesus asks him not to tell anyone about the healing, but this is far too exciting to keep to himself. The man cannot wait to tell everyone about the wonder God has worked for him. We don't know if he brags about his healing, taking on some self-importance in the process, or if he is just so eager to share this exciting good news that he can't keep it in.

Have you ever been asked to keep a secret that is so exciting that you can almost literally feel the itch to tell someone? Can you picture this: after receiving God's healing grace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, you walk out of the church and excitedly tell everyone you see that God has forgiven your sins? That is what this man was doing.

Have *you* ever felt the healing touch of Jesus? When you were feeling down and out and prayed, "If you will to do so, you can cure me"—and suddenly you felt as cheerful as a chirping bird?

And how often have *you* extended the healing touch to others? The healing touch of affirmation? Someone is depressed or uncertain or feeling inferior or a student seems lost and doesn't know which way to turn, and you point out some quality that enhances that person's self-worth. It wasn't that much for you to do. But for the other person it was huge—new hope, new possibilities, new life. What one person needs to be touched by you this week? Let not these seven days pass by without making that contact.

This simple account of the man with leprosy that we have heard so many times, is perhaps not so simple as it seems. It can lead us in many different directions, but all of them lead us back to the unconditional love of our God. In a few minutes we will be touched as directly and dramatically as was that terrified leper in Mark's story, as we take the Body of Christ into our very being. May we allow that touch to heal the sores and contagions and fears and pride within us, so that we might then become his healers in our world.