

Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Today's Lepers

February 11, 2018

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I don't know about you, but today's first reading sends a chill down my spine. Can you imagine not only the physical suffering from such a chronic, incurable condition but even worse having to warn any who approached you by crying "unclean, unclean!" and being told you had to find a place outside of town, away from the rest of us? Leprosy was more than a disease, it was a curse. It inspired terror. For it disfigured one's appearance, and in a largely oral, honor-shame culture one's appearance was all important. In Greek for example, the word for good and the word for beauty and grace was the same—*kalon*, noble in English. A noble appearance bespoke a noble character.

All of us, I suspect, have had moments when we worry whether we too would be treated like lepers if people were to penetrate behind our public appearance and see us as we really are. All of us know how crippling can be the fear of being shamed and shunned if we were to say what we really think, or if we were to stand up to those who would put us down. A Jesuit friend of mine who had spent his life working on the Indian missions had a great saying for us in times such as these. What other people think about you, he would say, is none of your business. What other people think of you is none of your business. Let go of trying to meet the expectations of others, and strive to live up to your own. Be yourself, listen to the spirit dwelling within your heart, and do what you are called to do.

He also had a great way of putting how we should treat others too. He would speak of the "Kin-dom of God." Not kingdom, but "kindom" of God. In God's sight we are all family. And so we are called to treat the poor and the sick as close relatives who have fallen on hard times, to treat the sinner as a stray son or daughter.

The moral measure of a society is not in the number of its poor and

possessed, its sick and its sinners, for as Jesus himself says, these are with us always. No, the measure of a society is in how we care for our poor and possessed, our sick and its sinners. A society that seeks to expel and expunge itself of those it judges “unclean” may appear pure, but it is a living hell for all who fear that they may fall short. On the other hand a society that seeks to embrace and empower those who fall or fail is the very presence of heaven on earth—the realization of God’s Kindom.

We can treat leprosy today. We can cure it. Who have taken their place? Who are today’s lepers? In disfiguring one’s appearance, leprosy attacked one’s self worth, one’s very soul. What lies at the heart of our sense of self today? In part at least, its our reason. And so mental illness has perhaps replaced physical illness as the leprosy of our information society. When we are depressed, when we fall into addiction, when we are overwhelmed with anxiety or grief we too withdraw from others, and others from us. Even friends and family may withdraw from us because we are hurting and they don’t know what to say or do. And so they can feel helpless, useless. And pretty frustrated. And their empathy for us only brings them down with us. And we agree. We feel we are not good to be around, that we are contagious. And despite all reminders that its all in our head, or to get off the pity-pot , in the throws of mental illness we can feel we are incurable, not only sick but cursed. After all if it is only in our heads what are we to do, get a new head? The brain is the one organ you can’t transplant. What are we to do, run away? But wherever we go, there we are.

In running the Honors program at Gonzaga I have had a few students come to me every year confiding that they are suffering from depression, overwhelming anxiety, alcoholism, anorexia. They scare themselves with impulses to cut themselves, even kill themselves altogether. Now they will only come when they are at their wit’s end. Because of course they think they should be able to handle it by themselves. They always have before. And now they want to be a grown up, someone who can take care of themselves. Mental struggle hits them where they live, it does not just hurt, it is humiliating, they

feel ashamed in a way they would never feel from a broken leg, or mono.

Now I am not a psychiatrist. But I can help them come to the decision to go to one. I can't cure them but I can be with them when they are afraid no one should get near them. And I can tell them something that they have not lived long enough to know themselves, that they are not alone. That most all of us have suffered from depression, anxiety, addiction—perhaps not as extreme, perhaps not clinically, but enough to be sympathetic to those who are, enough to treat you not like a leper but like kin.

They resist the thought of going to a therapist, they have a horror of having to take meds, because they see it as a sign of failure, and not a particular failure either, but a sign that their life is a failure, before they have hardly started out.

Jesus cures the leper through a simple gesture. He reaches out and touches the man. Lepers were to warn people at their approach because they were contagious. But in this story, it is Jesus who is contagious. His holiness and grace overwhelms the victim's defilement and exorcizes the demon that has taken possession of his or her soul. So too with our own contemporary leprosy. What can we do? We are not psychiatrists. But we can at least begin the healing process by reaching out to the afflicted, being with them when they feel no one should. And when we ourselves fall into the pit, we can remember not to bat away all help. We may feel like we will simply pull them down too, but those who would be with us in our pain are not alone either, and together we may well be able to pull ourselves out.

It would be a miracle. But then that's is what Jesus did. Perform miracles. Jesus calls us join him, to be his companions in the creation of the Kin-dom of God