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Did you ever notice how time seems to slow down during the most meaningful moments of life? We may drive home without remembering a single portion of a 30-minute trek through traffic; someone accustomed to the kitchen may fix dinner hardly noticing the particulars she tends to in pre-heating, seasoning, chopping and putting a casserole in the oven. Yet, when we are standing at the bedside of a dying parent, attending the birth of a child or asking the question that will lead to a life-long decision, each second seems to have its own import as our feelings blend with sensual perceptions and create enduring memories. It is as if time's duration comes with variable thickness or weight.

Mark tells the story of Jesus and the man with leprosy with moment-enhancing emotion. Perhaps it is because Jesus had just told his disciples that going out among the people was the very reason for which he had come. Perhaps Mark knew the man in question and had reminisced about the story with him. Maybe it was just that Mark had discovered that the time of Jesus' life overflowed with moments of profound meaning and Mark dedicated himself to communicating them. For whatever motive, Mark tells this story in evocative detail.

When the leper came to Jesus, he was doing something forbidden. He must have been at least a little frightened. Instead of respecting the law that relegated him to the margins of society, he knelt down in front of Jesus as to one who not only had the power to help him, but who could also exercise the freedom to do what the law would not and could not do: to accept and heal rather than banish him.

Speaking with the audacity of someone who has no other options, the man summoned Jesus to reveal what he was all about: "If you wish, you can make me clean." The man had no question about whether Jesus could accomplish the feat, only whether Jesus wanted to do so, whether he would choose it as part of the mission for which he had come.

According to Mark, the man's request stirred Jesus to his depths. Even before he could speak, his hand was reaching out, touching the man's spurned and suffering body, transforming it with tenderness. Then pronouncing the words that explained his gesture and made his will effective, Jesus said, "I do will it. Be made clean."

With that, Jesus commissioned the healed man as the first apostle to the leaders of the Jews: "Go, show yourself to the priest ... offer what Moses prescribed; that will be proof." Whether the man got to the priests, we do not know, but he did not follow Jesus' order to keep quiet with others. His story made Jesus the man of the moment and took away any hope of anonymity. If he did not go to the towns, they came to him.

What gave this story its “thickness” was the man’s vulnerable openness and honesty and Jesus’ spontaneous tenderness. The man knew his own need like no one else, and he was willing to expose it. While society refused to countenance him, he found in Jesus someone who had no fear of contamination or mortality. The afflicted man’s audacity met Jesus’ utter freedom to love and that combination proclaimed the Gospel in the sight of the people.

It is a beautiful story. But, what does it tell those who do not suffer from leprosy? First of all, the story calls us to a recognition of all that we share with the leper. Since his condition was obvious, society ordered him to hide away from sight. We, on the other hand, are quite adept at hiding our weakness and the unsightly, sinful aspects of our life. Perhaps the worst of it is that we can hide them from ourselves, believing in the image we project rather than the truth of who we are. Our friend the one-time leper would remind us that Christ can only touch and heal what we bring before him; if we don’t bring our genuine self, we will never truly encounter Christ. He might add that we never hear of Jesus reaching out and touching someone who was self-sufficient, but only those who knew they needed him.

Coming before God with a willingness to be nothing other than ourselves and to expose our need will take us into the realm of thick time. We may do that in private prayer, in sacrament or with a community. Mark told the story in a way that points out that the time and place do not matter. What is vital is the courage to place our truest self before God as well as the vulnerability to allow God to touch and transform us. Whether we ask for healing or forgiveness or inspiration, we can trust what Jesus said: “I do will it!”

May God’s will be done!

LEVITICUS 13:1-2, 44-46

The name of the Book of Leviticus comes from the name Levi which designated the priestly tribe of the people of Israel. Much of the book is concerned with the cult and its priestly functions. Under that general rubric, we find a great concern for holiness which is often connected to wholeness.

When we realize that proof of a scientific germ theory explaining the spread of disease did not become common until the early 1800s, we can appreciate the fact that approaches to disease and sick people that may seem odd or even cruel to us were based on a different worldview. For the ancient Israelites, any skin disease could be considered unclean. To be unclean was tantamount to being unholy. Uncleanliness was contagious in the sense that contact with the unholy made a person unholy or unclean as well. Then to add to the problem, most people understood disease and even bad luck as signs of God’s justice: The afflicted person was being punished. Such a philosophy made it virtuous to avoid people whose conditions might be disgusting, thereby doubling down on the tendency to marginalize the afflicted ones.

On a more unconscious level, leprosy is symbolic of everything we fear. It represents the loss of beauty, of bodily integrity and then relationships. As the reading from Leviticus points out, someone with a visible skin disease was to be kept separate from the community. Thus, a “leper,” someone who had a skin disease that could be as simple as acne or as vexatious as psoriasis or shingles, was not only miserable, but really relegated to exist in an atmosphere of the living dead because of their social isolation. People feared lepers because they reminded them of their own subjection to decay. Shunning the leper was, among other things, an unconscious social mechanism that protected the group from facing its own frailty and mortality. Sociologically the “lepers” were scapegoats: Isolating them seemed to offer protection against all that their condition symbolized.

About the only good thing that could be said about their condition was that it was not necessarily permanent. A person whose skin disease was healed could be declared ritually clean and readmitted to society. That, too, offered subconscious comfort to society: the possibility of a reprieve against danger and death.

When we allow ourselves to be conscious of the social tendency to find scapegoats to represent our guilt and suffer the consequences, this reading calls us to remember the counter-example of Christ. He continually reached out to people shunned by society and, at the same time, he frequently criticized those who rejected them as hypocrites who were often guiltier than the people they accused of sin. This can lead us to consider who the “lepers” in our society are and to further ask why we fear them and how they represent that which we reject in ourselves. If we would but follow Jesus in his outreach to the outcast, we would find that we not only do a better job of loving our neighbor, but that greater and honest

self-acceptance will appear in our lives as well.

PSALMS 32:1-2, 5, 11

What the ancients called leprosy was a disease that respected no moral code among its victims. It could afflict the good and the bad, the potentate as well as the peasant, working the same havoc on each of their lives. People with leprosy, like people with any other disease, turned to God for healing. When people of deep faith received the cure they sought or simply came to a deeper awareness of God's love, they would have easily sung the refrain of today's psalm, rejoicing in how God can turn any sorrow into joy.

The text of Psalm 32 takes the question of healing from disease into the realm of sin and forgiveness. Leprosy is understood as symbolic of sinfulness as well as the isolation we bring on ourselves when we destroy our relationships. Forgiveness implies the healing of those ills. Underneath our Judeo-Christian faith, there is a deep intuition that sin brings death. Although we may not always fully appreciate the logical conclusion that confession and forgiveness therefore bring life and healing, that is what Psalm 32 celebrates.

As we pray this psalm, it is crucial that we recognize the importance of the second stanza. The psalmist says: "I acknowledged my sin ... and you took away the guilt." Open recognition of my sin is the opposite of the scapegoating which blames another for ill. Scapegoating harms the innocent and suppresses the real problem such that it only grows more powerful in darkness and silence. As many as 2,500 years ago, Hebrew wisdom taught that the more we hide our sin, the more power it has over us. The psalmist tells us that confessing our faults is the necessary path to allowing God to take away our guilt. (If you want confirmation of that, ask anyone who has gone through the 12-step program of recovery from addiction.)

The power of this psalm-prayer depends on the depth with which we take in its message. If we ask for help simply to get out of our scrapes, to be rescued from the results of our waywardness, we are asking God to act like a crafty lawyer. Unfortunately, that is not God's specialty. If, on the other hand, we turn to God to heal the deep causes of our selfishness or fear, we will find that our time of trouble can become a time of salvation. Christ will be waiting to touch us at whatever depth we open to him. When that happens, we will understand what we sing at the Easter Vigil, "O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!"

1 CORINTHIANS 10:31-11:1

In this section of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul is trying to deal with questions of freedom and scandal. While he believes that the Christian is free from the law and can eat anything, including food that has been sacrificed to idols, he is concerned for the people who would be shocked by such behavior. In trying to find a way to tell his companions that they are free to do anything except offend others, he comes up with a solution that offers food for meditation about everything in life, not just about what one buys at the market or puts on the table.

"Whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God." By saying that, Paul is calling his community to a constant imitation of Christ. Everything they do should proclaim God's goodness to the world. Even more, everything they do should be a sign of the sort of glory Jesus manifested. That was not the glory of the empire or even the philosophers, but the glory of the one who could give up everything for love of humanity (Philippians 2). To give glory to God is to live by a standard of self-giving love.

Paul's advice about the specific situation that led him to make this statement is a perfect example of what he means. While people are free to eat or drink anything, their concern for others overrides any exercise of freedom; God is glorified in love not license. That, of course, does not mean they should never offend. Paul himself has risked lots of offense in the course of this letter, but that, too, was for the glory of God because he was insisting that his people be true to who they were called to be.

Paul's call to do everything we do for the glory of God is a far more demanding standard than any set of laws. The Ignatian examen of consciousness encourages people to look back on their day and recognize where they met God, where they responded well and where they did not. Paul's injunction might be seen as more proactive. Instead of reviewing our

actions, Paul suggests that we cultivate the awareness that we can make every decision about what we do based on the standard of what gives greater glory to God. This is an ongoing orientation to life that goes further than honesty or hard-working effort. It suggests that there are many goods from which to choose and our decisions should be made in terms of what action will be the most revealing of Christ's self-emptying love.

MARK 1:40-45

We might do well to listen to today's Gospel, and even everything that follows, as filling out Jesus' statement "For that I have come" (1:38). Jesus' fame had spread and he was making his way through the villages of Galilee. Then Mark tells us that a leper came out to Jesus.

Mark does nothing to identify this person. He mentions no name, he doesn't tell us when this happened or where. It's as if this afflicted man appears on the scene to represent everyone who needs what Jesus has come to offer. The man tells Jesus, "If you wish, you can make me clean." It is almost as if he were looking for confirmation of the reason for which Jesus came, asking, "Is this it?" The man clearly believes that Jesus has the power to heal him, but the leper wants to know if that is also Jesus' desire.

Mark describes Jesus' response in highly emotional terms. First, he is moved with pity. The term pity does not imply that Jesus felt sorry for him, but rather that he had compassion, that Jesus felt with him. This compassion is a feeling of solidarity referring to how a mother feels for the child of her womb. It is a feeling that is so affective that it has physical repercussions. Just as he had done with Peter's mother-in-law, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the man. As if confirming that the man had correctly assessed his mission, Jesus said, "I do will it." Then, like God the Creator, Jesus spoke a word and what he said came about. He said, "Be made clean," and the leprosy left the man.

In the next movement of the story, Jesus makes the formidable demand that the man tell no one anything. Instead of spreading the story, he is supposed to present his situation to the priest and to make the prescribed offering as a testimony that he had been healed. The fact that Jesus sent the man to the priest suggests that that the former leper became the first apostle, the first person Jesus sent out to give testimony to him. And the first testimony Jesus ordered was directed to the religious leaders of his day. Mark never tells whether or not he spoke to the priest, but he did spread the word about Jesus and his power.

Planning: 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Every year since 1993, the memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes has been designated as World Day of the Sick. This observance was established by Pope John Paul II the year after he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. (This was also the day that Pope Benedict announced his retirement in 2013, citing his declining health as his reason.)

Since February 11 is a Sunday this year, the memorial will not be observed. The readings for this Sunday, however, still make this a good time to consider a communal celebration of the anointing of the sick. This could be done at a separate service in the afternoon perhaps, though it can also be offered during the Sunday Mass(es).

Planners should consult with those who visit the sick to see what time(s) would work best for those they visit, if they are able to get to church. Assistance from other parishioners can make travel to the church easier for some.

The readings should make it easy for the preacher to link the anointing to the Eucharist. The strictures placed on lepers in biblical times are countered by the compassion Jesus showed in his healing ministry. Many of the sick feel as isolated as those lepers and need the support and compassion of Christ mediated through the church community.

There is often some confusion among parishioners about who should receive the anointing. Planners might read carefully the introduction to the rite in the ritual book. It spells out rather clearly how to do the discernment needed. The challenge

is to find that middle ground between anointing anybody who wants the sacrament, even if they have no serious illness, and restricting it to only those on death's door. This is a sacrament for the sick, not just for the dying. The introduction to the rite urges it to be celebrated before surgery, if a serious illness is the reason for the surgery. The sacrament may be celebrated with children if they are old enough to benefit from it.

Ash Wednesday: Lent begins this week. Planners should consult with priests and deacons to determine the best schedule for Masses that day and whether other times of distributing ashes are needed. Chapter 51 of the Book of Blessings reminds us that distribution of ashes outside of Mass should be offered in the context of a celebration of the word. Even when ashes are brought to the sick, "at least one Scripture reading should be included." The rubrics note that the service may be celebrated by a priest or deacon and that lay ministers may assist with the distribution. Be sure to have some soapy water or wet wipes for the distributors to clean their hands after the distribution.

Prayers: 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

There is often no escape from illness. And, sometimes an illness is considered socially unacceptable and those afflicted cannot escape the injustice and the judgement that can accompany the condition. Today's readings focus on leprosy, but they could be about any disease or condition that evokes fear, alienation or condemnation. Those who suffer are urged to turn to God for healing. All of us are called to imitate Jesus, who throughout his life, embraced and healed the sick and outcast. It is a hard challenge to ignore and an even harder one for many of us to accept.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you heard the leper who called upon you for help: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you stretched out your hand and healed the outcast: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to open our hearts, especially to the marginalized: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider We pray now for all in need of healing, especially the alienated.

Minister For the whole church: that we may faithfully imitate Christ in embracing the world's sick and disenfranchised ... we pray,

- For those who are treated as "lepers" today because of racism, sexism, economic inequality, or any kind of injustice; and for the courage to own our complicity in all manner of social sin ... we pray,
- For those who suffer from socially unacceptable diseases; for programs and people who care for them; and for our own compassionate concern ... we pray,
- For health care that adequately meets the needs of all people; and for the willingness to provide it even at our own personal cost ... we pray,
- For all of us who seek to heal others through our parish ministries or through loving attention, listening or any kind of caring support ... we pray,

Presider God of mercy, we turn to you on behalf of all who are troubled in any way. We yearn to be people of compassion, but we sometimes lack the courage to reach out to those considered unacceptable. Help us to treat all who suffer as Jesus did. We ask this in his healing name. Amen.

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