Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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February 13, 2021

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“If you wish, you can make me clean” (Mark 1:40).

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lev 13:1-2, 44-46; Ps 32; 1 Cor 10:31-11:1; Mark 1:40-45

It is only a coincidence that today’s Gospel about healing a leper falls on Valentine’s Day. But if Jesus’ compassion shows his radical disregard for social convention, he clearly rejects our cultural obsession with skin as what makes us worthy of love. The leper was an outcast, an untouchable and a moral defective to be avoided at all costs. Jesus’ compassionate response to him was an act of human solidarity that violated every social and religious rule, making him, like the leper, ritually unclean.

The story shows the pathos surrounding disease; the victim was disfigured, cut off from family, excluded from worship, forced to beg to survive while declaring himself “Unclean!” Because his condition was also linked to sin, he was dependent on priests to judge when he might rejoin society. The leper’s willingness to risk rejection when he knelt before Jesus was evident in his plea: “*If you wish*, you can make me clean.”

When Jesus reached out to touch the leper, he was not just breaking a taboo, he was dismantling a whole system based on the idea that Creation was divided into clean and unclean. Jesus affirmed God’s compassion for everyone, including lepers, outcasts and sinners. Love overrides every law or convention. The First Commandment of Love of God and of neighbor is supreme.

In a now famous 1969 episode of “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood” during racial tensions over segregated swimming pools, Fred Rogers invited one of the show’s African American characters playing a police officer to share his small wading pool. The image of the two men sitting beside one another with their bare feet in the water and sharing a towel broke two barriers: one about sharing public pools and the other by depicting a black police officer. The scene showed thousands of children across the country what being neighbors looked like.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObHNWh3F5fQ

This episode of a children’s television show, broadcast a year after the country had erupted in violence following the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, captures for us the shock Jesus must have caused by touching a leper. Tragically, 50 years later,

race continues to be the flashpoint of untouchability in American culture and the subtext for inflamed racial tensions threatening to divide the nation.

When Jesus stretched out his hand to touch a fellow human being, he made this the measure of neighborliness for all his disciples. He brilliantly repeated this message in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Compassion is the only rule we need to determine who is neighbor to us. We might say, the entire Gospel is contained in the simple request: “Please, won’t you be my neighbor?”

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