

SIXTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Mark 1:40-45

Our Scripture passage for this week comes from the Gospel of Mark 1:40-45. In this text we read of Jesus healing a leper and of the leper's response. On the surface, it looks like a very simple miracle story, but there is a deeper lesson in discipleship being offered as well.

This passage provides us an opportunity to learn something about who the lepers were in the time of Jesus and what their life experience was like. This background will help us understand Jesus' response. Today the term "leprosy" refers specifically to what is known as Hansen's disease. In the time of Jesus, however, the term "leper" referred to people who had a variety of scaly skin ailments. When a person was suspected of suffering such an ailment, their physical distress became worse because they were excluded from the community and forced to live in desolate places away from towns and homes. They were also required to wear torn clothing and to call out "unclean" as people approached (see Lv 13:i-2, 44-46). Thus, they suffered physically, socially, emotionally, and even spiritually (leprosy was believed to be a sign of God's punishment, see Nm 12:10). To be a leper was to live a desperate and miserable life. So far in Mark's Gospel, Jesus has met a lot of people in need as He progressed from healing the man with the unclean spirit in the Synagogue of Capernaum to healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law and now to a leper. This progression shows us that Jesus' ministry will reach out to everyone and that no one is beyond the boundaries of God's mercy. As with the previous healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, Jesus is going against certain religious laws and cultural norms in His interaction with the leper. The actions of Jesus in greeting and touching the leper challenge us to demonstrate the same active and courageous mercy in our lives towards those in desperate and miserable circumstances.

- *Who are the people that suffer the most from being on the margins of society today?*
- *How can people who suffer physically today also experience emotional, social, and spiritual suffering?*
- *What Grace does the Anointing of the Sick offer so as to help us overcome the various aspects of our suffering?*
- *How do we insulate ourselves from the suffering of others? When have you taken a risk (social, physical, or emotional) to reach out to someone who is marginalized in our world?*
- *Some ancient copies of the Gospel of Mark indicate that Jesus responded with "anger" when he saw the leper; this response most likely would have referred to our Lord's reaction to a society that forced lepers to live such a miserable life. What would Jesus be angry about in our society?*
- *What are some systems that allow or promote human suffering?*

It is interesting that Mark tells us that Jesus was moved with compassion when He saw the leper (some translations use the term "pity" or "mercy" instead). This is an important message for us because we tend to understand "compassion" in an emotional sense. Accordingly, "compassion" refers to the feeling or sentiment we experience when we see

someone else's distress. For Jesus, however, compassion was not just a feeling or emotion; rather, compassion was a motivation for action. When our Lord saw other people's suffering, He was able to identify with them and was willing to take action to alleviate their suffering. Just as suffering occurs on various levels (physical, social, emotional, and spiritual), so too does Jesus' compassionate response occur on various levels. We see this compassion in how Jesus touches the leper to break the barrier of isolation. (Note: The healing actually occurs at the Word of Jesus, so His touch was not necessary. His touch was to render human contact with a man who was isolated and alone.) In doing so, Jesus breaks the purity laws and incurs ritual defilement.

Jesus also reaches out to heal the man spiritually by showing him that God wants his healing, not his suffering, and that illness is not a sign of God's punishment. Jesus heals the man socially by allowing him to return to the community and be restored to his previous relationships. The compassion of Jesus is powerful indeed! Jesus is not afraid of being made "unclean" or rendered ritually impure by the situation of other people's lives; rather, Jesus is the "strong one" announced by John the Baptist who can make clean what is soiled in our lives and purify what is stained by sin. His holiness has the power to sanctify even the most outcast in our world.

- *As disciples, Jesus wants us to be instruments of His mercy for those who need it. How can the fear of becoming "unclean" (or being perceived as "unclean") prevent us from associating with outcasts in our world?*
- *Jesus desired to bring healing to the leper on a variety of levels, not just physically. How can we help heal people who suffer spiritually, emotionally, and socially?*
- *What has led us to reduce compassion and mercy to merely emotional or sentimental experiences?*
- *Why do you think we have learned to be unresponsive in the face of other people's suffering?*

The disobedience of the healed man is another significant aspect of this passage. You see, while Jesus demonstrates His power and control over the forces of illness, disease, and evil spirits, the one thing Jesus does not do is take away our free will and force us to act in a certain manner. Thus, Jesus does not control our human decisions. In this passage, Jesus does what the leper asks, but the healed leper doesn't do what Jesus asks. As disciples, this is a very important and powerful insight for us. Just like the man in the story, Jesus shares manifold blessings with us. Through the Gospel, and in the quiet of our prayer, He asks us to respond to Him in a very specific way. All too often we are like the healed man who is more concerned about getting God to do what we want rather than doing what God is wanting from us. For the healed man, his call to fame was the miraculous healing he received from Jesus. However, as disciples our call to boast should be in how well we fulfill God's will in our lives. In our contemporary secular culture, we value human freedom over all other values; in discipleship, we should value obedience to God's will first and foremost. As God, Jesus knew that the healed man would not follow our Lord's instruction, but He healed him anyway. That, too, is an important lesson for us because it reminds us that we can't control how other people will respond to our good works-but discipleship calls us to show compassion nonetheless. In short, we are

responsible for being merciful; other people are responsible for how they respond to that mercy.

- *How much of your prayer is spent asking God for something rather than seeking to listen to what God is asking of you?*
- *When do you find it easy to exempt yourself from charitable actions because you don't know how others will respond to your mercy?*
- *The man was separated from the community because of his disease (leprosy), but Jesus ended up being separated from others because of the man's disobedience. How can the disobedience of Christians today end up separating others from the encounter with Jesus?*

Lastly, this passage teaches us something about the nature of authentic prayer. It is no accident that the leper approaches Jesus with the phrase, "If you will, you can make me clean." First, that prayer is an acknowledgement of God's all powerful will and of our dependence upon that will. We even see Jesus praying with these same words in the Garden of Gethsemane when he says in Mark 14:36, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup be taken away from me, yet not as I will but as you will". We also see that ultimate desire for God's will to be done in the Lord's Prayer when we say, "Thy will be done". Second, the prayer of the leper shows us that God can do all things, including controlling disease and the forces of the world. Rather than seeing disease and misfortune as a sign of God's punishment, the prayer of the leper invites us to understand it as the opportunity for God's mercy. Third, the leper falls on his knees when he makes his request, which is a sign of adoration and of placing his life humbly before the Lord. In everything the man does, he is praying with the right words, the right attitude, and even the right posture. We should commend and imitate him for his accurate and powerful prayer! When Jesus responds, we see the Lord not only speaking His Word but also performing an action of mercy. Jesus demonstrates the important connection between words and deeds. Not only does He speak a message of consolation to the man but then does something to help him. The man, on the other hand, may have had all his words of faith correct, but his deeds did not correspond to that verbalized faith. For the virtue of faith to be complete and have integrity, there must always be a correlation between what we say and what we do. This two-fold dimension of faith is oftentimes described as *Fides Quae* (faith which is believed) and *Fides Qua* (how I live out what I believe).

- How does the relationship between *Fides Quae* (faith which is believed) and *Fides Qua* (how I live out what I believe) as demonstrated in this story challenge your own experience of faith as a disciple?
- What posture helps you enter more deeply into an attitude of prayerful reverence?
- How does the correlation between the prayer of the leper, the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, and the Lord's Prayer affect the way you will approach your prayer?
- Why do you think Mark wanted us to know about a person who had all the right ways to pray but ultimately didn't follow God's will after the prayer was answered?