

By Father Charles Bowes

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46
1 Corinthians 1:31-11:1
Mark 1:40-45

God touches and comforts from the midst of our own brokenness and need.

One day in 1885, Damien deVeuster stood up in the chapel on Molokai and began his sermon by saying, “My fellow lepers.” It was his way of announcing that he had contracted the disease. He too had become an exile. But he’d become an exile long before that when he went to the colony. Once there, he could never leave because of the world’s fear of the disease.

Jesus’ miracle in Mark chapter 1 removes the barriers that keep us apart, declaring that in God’s kingdom, there are no pariahs, outcasts, misfits, exiles. No one is anathema. Very likely, according to scholars, the skin disease that Jesus cures is not the bacterial infection we know as leprosy, Hansen’s Disease. What Jesus cured is something that could be as mild as a case of athlete’s foot. It was a big deal because the law of the time made it big. Two chapters of the book of Leviticus are set aside to describe leprosy, its ritual identification and the ritual that declares a person clean. The “leprous” person was seen as somehow “corrupted”; their skin manifested the condition. Not

people only, but clothing, linens and buildings could also be declared “leprous” and “unclean” if they became mildewed or moldy. Being a leper in the first century meant not only suffering from one of the variety of skin disorders, but being a social outcast...making it mandatory not to be part of the community – and in a society like that, death could follow rather quickly.

“If you choose, you can make me clean,” says the leper in Mark chapter 1. Note how the leper does not ask to be healed, but to “be made clean.” He was asking to be restored to the community, asking not for a physical cure alone, but for the physical cure for the sake of a beneficial change in his spiritual state. Jesus is described as “moved with pity.” The Greek verb is “moved in one’s innermost parts,” or “moved by deep feeling.” It is appropriately used in a scene where Jesus reaches out to touch the “untouchable.” For a leper, accustomed to reactions of fear and repulsion, to be touched by another with compassion would have been startling. In Second Kings chapter 5, the prophet Elisha cures Naaman the leper, but he does not touch him. To do so is an act of courage and well as mercy.

I know in my visits to hospitals I have been fearful of drawing near those with AIDS...apprehensive at least until I entered the room.

What keeps us from living the way of Jesus, with

barriers down? Our fear. Not our fear of disease, but our fear that we will become exiles, that we will become tarred with the same brush as the those who are set apart, different, other, strange. We want to be part of the covenant people, the people who fit in, get along, are well liked and invited to parties. Difference makes us afraid... whether that be divorce or illness or mental health or widowhood.

Jesus' miracle does not only heal the leper; it heals all those who learn about it. They begin to see people anew without the blinders of fear or distrust, without the brands and labels that limit our generosity and the bounds we set on the covenant. St. Mark's language suggests this healing of perceptions. The story of the leper comes at the end of a whole series of healing miracles. Those who are healed are identified by their diseases, by what make them different and sets them apart: "A man with an unclean spirit," "a mother-in-law sick with a fever," "all who were sick or possessed with demons," "a leper." Finally at the end of these stories is the statement: *people* came to him from every corner...not the diseased, outcasts, lepers, the broken, but *people*.

My fellow lepers, our task is not so much to recognize that we are all diseased but to recognize that being diseased makes no difference to our identity. We're all *people*, God's people, members of the covenant. As there is not limit to the reach of God's love, so there is to be no limit to our embrace. God's covenant embraces all, not just those with the right doctrine, clothes, or party hat. No one is excluded. All are welcome at this table, for all are equally healed of whatever would divide us. We have all been lepers, exiles, outcasts, pariahs, AIDS-sufferers, widows, addicts.

We are so no longer, but to the extent that we permit others to be so branded, we deny our freedom and reject God's healing.

Is not this bread the same for all – is not the table equal in size so that we might be equal around it?

Mrs. Kendal was a famous British actress of the nineteenth century. She appeared as a character in the powerful movie *The Elephant Man*, which, you may recall, is the true story of a man grotesquely and horribly disfigured.

In the movie, Mrs. Kendal visited John Merrick, the elephant man, and she held out her hand to take his hand. And he extended the less deformed of his two hands; Mrs. Kendal stood there, looked him straight in the eye, and shook her head. Merrick paused a long time, then drew his horribly deformed other hand out from under his coat. Mrs. Kendal took his hand in hers and smiled. Merrick said that this was the first time in his life that a woman had held his hand.

Let us pray: God of compassion, in whatever we do, may it be for your glory. As we long for your mercy, may we reach out to all those in need with the healing touch of your son who is Christ the Lord. Amen.

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