

## **SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME    FEBRUARY 14, 2021**

It has been asserted that Saint Francis of Assisi is the only Christian who has ever really lived the life of Jesus Christ seriously. That may be an exaggeration but there is no doubt that Francis took the gospel seriously and lived it to a radical degree.

One story of his life includes the time, shortly after his conversion, when he was not sure what he had to do now that he had renounced wealth and power. He came upon a leper on the road; he stopped and went over and kissed the leper.

Our first reading today, from the Book of Leviticus, portrays how people were to treat lepers. They were to live apart and alone outside of the camp. I don't know about you but I doubt that I would have gone out and kissed one of them.

Think of that as you reflect on today's gospel. Jesus stretched out his hand, touched the leper and cured him. By touching him, Jesus himself would have become unclean and to be avoided. Jesus does observe the Jewish legal requirements and sends the cured leper to the priest to be declared clean and able to rejoin the community. What did Jesus do about his own state of uncleanness? And what did spectators think?

During his papacy, Pope Francis has inspired us by both his words and own example: to reach out to the people on the edge of society – the poor, the marginalized, minorities, immigrants. In his annual Lenten message to us given this past week, he suggests that Catholics experience God's love during Lent by caring for those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. To experience Lent with love, he says, means caring for those who suffer or feel abandoned and fearful. We are to help others by words of reassurance and help others to realize that God loves them as sons and daughters.

We may ask who are the lepers in our society. Who are kept apart? How do we contribute to keeping them apart? Do we segregate some people? Do we deny them communion in our groups?

This brings us to another level. Are we aware that we ourselves have need of healing in our lives? Admission of the truth is the first condition for change. How

do we, for instance, react when we hear that “Black Lives Matter”? Are we willing to look into our own hearts, our own cultural conditioning, our own fears and prejudices and acknowledge that we have been touched by racism and white supremacy?

A paradox of Christian faith is that it requires of us a frame of mind we are least comfortable with: an acceptance of our own existential disabilities. The gospel invites us to enter the mystery of our own limitations, hidden or otherwise. Growing in a spiritual life requires us to discover the leper within us that needs healing. Healing requires a truthful acknowledgement and then an open confession to God, “If you wish, you can make me clean” as the leper in the gospel said. We may be unable to heal ourselves but opening our wounds and fearful hearts to God allows God to heal us.

When we are young, we need to build up a strong ego to deal with the world. The second half of life challenges us to go within and get beyond the ego to faith. This demands an acknowledgement of our vulnerability and weaknesses.

In a past homily, I have shared a quotation from Saint Therese of Lisieux. I keep this quote on my desk and review it periodically. It is so real and challenging. It goes like this, “If you are willing to bear serenely the trial of being displeasing to yourself, then you will be for Jesus a place of shelter.” We can stop telling God how good we are and open our wounded hearts to God’s loving healing. This is also a path to embrace lepers outside of us. If we can accept our own disabilities, we can embrace those in others as well.

The season of Lent begins this Wednesday. It could be a good time to make friends with the leper within us, to befriend it, to accept it, to kiss our inner leper and let God, and others, see it and bring healing to us.

**Timothy J. Joyce, OSB, STL**