

## Homily for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 14, 2021

The episode described in our Gospel today is short but powerful. An afflicted man approaches our Lord and falls to his knees and begs, *“If you choose, you can make me clean.”*

The man’s affliction is described as “leprosy,” which in ancient times was greatly feared. People knew that not every skin eruption was leprosy but they had no scientific test to make a proper diagnosis. And so, if a person was suspected of having leprosy he or she would have to live away from others until it was proven otherwise. To make everyone aware of their condition they had to wear torn clothing, leave their hair disheveled, cover their upper lip, and cry out in warning if anyone should approach, “Unclean, unclean!”

The leper was considered ritually unclean and was therefore barred from entering the Temple, God’s holy dwelling place, to participate in the liturgical worship of Israel. It could easily make the afflicted person feel shunned by everyone, including God; a complete outcast.

And this degraded state would continue until the skin condition hopefully cleared up. If it did then the person would go to the priest to be examined and pronounced “clean.” But if the sufferer really had leprosy it would not clear up; it would only get progressively worse.

So, with this in mind let us return to the encounter between the leper and our Lord.

There is something unusual in what the leper says to Jesus when they meet that is easily overlooked. He does not *ask* Jesus to “heal” him. Rather, he *professes belief* that Jesus can make him “clean,” if Jesus so chooses.

That is not what we would expect. What we would expect is a straightforward request to be “healed.” The leper obviously knew Jesus was a miraculous healer. Our Lord’s reputation was already preceding Him. But the leper wanted something more from Jesus. He wanted to be made “clean.”

So, what’s the difference between being “healed” and being made “clean”? To be “healed” would be to have his physical ailment cured and his health restored. But to be made “clean” also includes being socially and religiously restored. It is to be allowed to return to your family and community, to go back to work, and to be able to worship God once again in the Temple. The leper was feeling the full weight of all that he had lost and was hoping Jesus would restore everything to him.

And so, when he came to Jesus and fell on his knees in humility and supplication, he had more in mind than simply physical healing. He wanted to be made whole again.

And he knew this was not something he could demand of Jesus. It was something he could only request. *“If you choose, you can make me clean.”* Our relationship with God is a gift from God freely given, but when broken only He can restore it, and only if He so chooses.

We do not read of Jesus expressing emotion too often in the gospels, but when the leprous man humbly and reverently knelt before Him and made his plea, our Lord was “*moved with pity.*” A commoner translation says “*moved with compassion.*” Either word reflects Jesus’ tender sympathy for the man.

Jesus now tells the leper, “*I do choose. Be made clean.*” While that in itself is wonderful, an answer to prayer, Jesus does something more. He reaches out His hand and actually touches the leper. The pure hands of the sinless Jesus touching the putrid flesh of the unclean man. Jesus heals the man by word and by action.

There is more to this story than just a miraculous healing. In fact, the emphasis on being made ritually clean and the way Jesus goes about doing it has an almost sacramental quality.

For as wonderful as Jesus’ physical healings are, the Son of God did not assume a human nature simply to heal lepers, or the blind, or other physical ailments. When we hear that He drove out demons or raised the dead back to life, we get closer to His ultimate mission.

Zechariah told us Jesus’ mission when he prophesied the role his own son, John the Baptist, would play in it, saying, “*for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the forgiveness of their sins*” (Luke 1:76-77).

And Jesus Himself emphasized the relationship between His miraculous healings and His saving mission when in curing a paralytic He told His audience, *“For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’? **But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins**’—He then said to the paralytic—‘Stand up, take your bed and go to your home’”* (Matthew 9:5-6).

For the deadliest problem in our lives today is not a skin disease or COVID-19 or even cancer. The deadliest problem in our lives is sin. It separates us from the life of God and our eternal destiny with Him. It disfigures the divine image within us. It makes us outcasts from God and the community of saints. And it is only through the power of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection that we can be healed of this terrible infirmity.

Jesus cleansed the leper who came in humble supplication before Him. But Jesus no longer walks the earth as He did 2000 years ago. So how do we go to Him to be cleansed today, not of skin disease but of sin disease? Well, Christ established His Church to continue His mission to the end of time. On Resurrection Sunday He imparted the power to forgive sins to His apostles: *“As the Father has sent Me, so I send you.’ When He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’”* (John 21-23). And that same priestly power has continued to this day.

In the Sacrament of Penance, we show ourselves to the priest and on our knees like the leper, we confess our sins to the Lord. And through

the outstretched arm and divine word spoken by the minister of Christ's reconciliation (see 2 Cor. 5:18) the Lord takes away the guilt of our sin.

This week we enter into the holy season of Lent: a time of repentance and renewal in preparation for Easter. What better time to come to Jesus in the Sacrament of Penance and seek His cleansing and healing power?

I am available for Confession every Saturday afternoon from 3:30pm till 4:00pm outside the side entrance of the church. I am also available in the glass house before every weekday Mass at 8:30am. And by appointment I am available anytime. One can also investigate Confession times at other parishes. Let us boldly take advantage of this season of grace. God bless.