

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday per Annum - B  
Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46;  
I Corinthians 10:31-11:1;  
Mark 1:40-45  
Little Flower - 2/11/24

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today is World Day of the Sick and the World Day of Marriage.

St. Pope John Paul II instituted the World Day of the Sick in 1992. He chose February 11<sup>th</sup> because if today were not a Sunday, it would be the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. The theme of this year's World Day of the Sick is "'It is not good that man should be alone': Healing the Sick by Healing Relationships."

Today's reading from Leviticus and today's Gospel are especially appropriate because they both deal with the disease of leprosy. In the reading from Leviticus, those with leprosy were required to isolate themselves from others. In effect, they became the outcasts of society, the living dead. They were isolated because leprosy was thought to be highly contagious, and there was no cure. It was disfiguring and eventually led to death. Today we know that it is not highly contagious, and today it is easily treatable.

Today's Gospel focuses on Jesus' compassion in his encounter with the man with leprosy. The story tells us that the man begged Jesus, "'If you wish, you can make me clean.'" With the phrase "'If you wish,'" the man was appealing to Jesus' compassion. Jesus was moved with pity, stretched out his hand, touched him (which was unthinkable), and said, "'I do will it. Be made clean.'" In other words, Jesus' decision to heal the man was very intentional.

To understand the significance of this miracle, we have to understand the significance of the Levitical law. Imagine what it would be like to be cut off, isolated, from family, friends, and community, as, for example, we were to some extent during COVID. Curing the man, Jesus not only healed him from a terrible illness that would ultimately take his life. Because family and community were everything for the Jewish people, he was already among the living dead. Therefore, when Jesus cured the man, Jesus gave him back his life. He could go home to family and community.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus calls us to "'Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate'" [6:36; British JB 1966]. Compassion is intentional. To be compassionate, we first have to be sensitive to the real needs of others, and then we have to be responsive to those needs as best we can. For example, when it comes to the sick, in his message for today, Pope Francis wrote, "...the first form of care needed in any illness is compassionate and loving closeness."

As I mentioned, in Jesus' time, the lepers were the living dead. In his First Letter, St. John wrote, "*The man who does not love is among the living dead*" [3:14; NAB, 1970]. Although St. John is referring to those who choose not to love, we know that many people's inability or unwillingness to love comes from not being loved or not feeling loved. We may not be able to cure physical illness, but we can intentionally choose to love others, and we can intentionally choose to be compassionate toward others.

Maybe today we should be asking who are today's lepers. Are there people or groups of people that we or others want to isolate, shun, or exclude from our lives and community? As Pope Francis wrote in his message for today, "At this time of epochal change, we Christians in particular are called to adopt the compassion-filled gaze of Jesus. Let us care for those who suffer and are alone, perhaps marginalized and cast aside. With the love for one another that Christ the Lord bestows on us in prayer, especially in the Eucharist, let us tend the wounds of solitude and isolation."

My brothers and sisters, the key verse in today's second reading is the last verse: "*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*" Several years ago, many people were wearing WWJD (What would Jesus do?) bracelets. However, it is often difficult to discern what Jesus would do in today's modern world. Therefore, it is important that we also choose contemporary role models whose lives are so virtuous that we want to be like them.