

*Readings*

Lv 13:1-2, 44-46

Ps 32:1-2, 5, 11

1 Cor 10:31–11:1

Mk 1:40-45

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J. Thomas Pohto, O.S.A.  
*Church of Our Mother of Good Counsel*  
*Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania*

In the first reading from the Law for the Israelites, the treatment of persons with leprosy was severe, because they feared that persons with leprosy would be contagious. So if a person was found by the priest to be leprous, he would be considered unclean and have to rent his garments, keep his head bare, muffle his beard and cry out, “Unclean, unclean!” He had to dwell apart from other people. And he was not permitted to enter the Temple to pray. He was pretty much separated from the rest of humanity and from God. And that seemed like an awful price to pay. Today we still remember what life was like during the pandemic.

Many years ago I visited the former leper colony on the island of Molokai in Hawaii. It is a National Historical Park, and persons with what is now called Hansen’s disease are treated elsewhere. I had a chance to listen to some of the members of the colony who were still there speak about their experiences in the leper colony. To this day I can still picture two large rocks in the Pacific Ocean, 100 and 300 yards from the shore. Boats and ships would come between those two rocks to drop off people for the colony. I was told that the people on the boats were so afraid of catching leprosy, that sometimes they would throw their passenger over the side into the water and speed off before the launch arrived to take the person to the colony. It is difficult to imagine such fear and such cruelty.

In the gospel story, the leper approached Jesus, and Jesus touched him. Jesus went against all tradition by rejecting separation. In touching the leper Jesus became legally unclean (and therefore unable to enter the Temple). However, touching is a beautiful thing. At the sign of peace at Mass we used to touch each other by shaking hands. It was the peace of Christ in me moving also to you and the peace of Christ in you moving into me. One day I hope we will allow ourselves to do that again. Jesus touched the leper and gave the leprosy a path to leave the man and a path of healing and health to move into the man. This is a far cry from throwing someone overboard and running. But it does remind us how comforting and healing it can be just to hold someone's hand or spend time with someone.

In the gospel story, Jesus told the cured man to tell no one anything, but to show himself to the priest. Sure, we know that the man was made clean of his leprosy. But something else happened in his encounter with Jesus. The man was touched by God. Let me say that again: The man was touched by God. And the need to show himself to the priest is a reminder of this. What did God do to this man? We don't know because instead of telling no one anything the man went away and publicized the whole matter. I hope he found out. He was cured, but some other kind of healing took place because of God's love. Such love always changes us. He became more like God.

Ash Wednesday is coming up this week and the season of Lent is upon us. The Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving challenge us once again. These Lenten activities invite us to reach out beyond ourselves to others and to God. We have the opportunity to touch others with our healing care for them, and to awaken the loving presence of God in them so they can become more like God.

The people in the scriptures were afraid they would get leprosy if they touched a leper. But the real story is that if we allow God to touch us or if we somehow touch others with good things, we will be filled with Godliness and so will they. We become not sick, but more like God.

Touch the hearts of others this Lent.