

Homily for 28th Sunday, c cycle

In years past we have heard the story of Christ's healing of the ten lepers many times. What more can be said about it? Perhaps a novel interpretation is warranted.

Consider one of our five senses, the sense of smell.

A story: Upon returning home from a high school trip to Europe in March of 1972, I was informed by my father that one of his close friends died, apparently suddenly, while I was away. Having not heard from him in over two weeks, he became alarmed, and feared the worst. When he went to his home he found his friend's car in the driveway. Though he knocked on the door several times, he received no answer. Eventually the police were called in to break open the door. When the door was finally opened, the stench of rotting flesh sickened my father. His friend had been dead for several days.

My father said that until his dying day he will always remember the foul smell of death.

Recall the words of Martha in John's account of the resurrection of Lazarus in the eleventh chapter:

"Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days".

In the cultural world of Jesus, the very word "leper" struck fear in the hearts of the people. Lepers lived in total isolation. They were among the first to practice "social distancing". Out of necessity they formed their own colonies. They each often positioned themselves on well-traveled roads to make appeals for charity. What made their life especially wretched was the widely held view that they were cursed by God and considered unfit for worship.

Leprosy was social death. The lepers were treated like the living dead.

In his biographical sketch of the life of Saint Francis of Assisi, historian Theodore Maynard writes of a key, defining moment in the life of the saint.

"One day while riding home, after he had been praying, as was now his want, at the little half-ruined church of St. Mary of the Angels, since made famous by its association with him under the name of the Little Portion, he (Francis) met a leper. Hitherto, the stench of leprosy had sickened him. This time he knew that the decisive moment had come: resisting an impulse of revulsion, Francis told himself, "You are not a knight of Christ if you are unable to conquer yourself"; then dismounting, he went up to the loathsome creature and kissed him. When later he swung around in his saddle to look back, the man had vanished; then Francis knew that in a leper's guise Christ had appeared to him".

Francis began to sing.

What lessons may we derive from today's gospel?

First, gratitude pleases Jesus very much while its absence brings him sorrow. Gratitude is a response to a gift. The foreigner, a Samaritan, expressed his gratitude in action. He prostrated himself at the feet of Jesus;

Second, the gospel reading is a hymn to faith. All ten lepers manifested faith in the healing power of Jesus. Without faith, the Lord's miracle would not have occurred;

Third, a common disease, leprosy, brought two ancestral enemies, nine Jews and a Samaritan, together.

One morning, several years ago, I was in the waiting room of the office of New York Oncology and Hematology in Albany Medical Center anticipating to see my doctor. Seated next to me was a Moslem woman wearing the distinctive Muslim headdress, the hijab. Although we did not share the same faith, we had something very much in common, a life threatening illness. Our conversation was brief, though memorable. She seemed so shy, yet we parted friends. We agreed to pray for each other.

While it is true that we have no contacts with lepers in twenty-first century America, we, nevertheless, encounter those on the margins of society who are often shunned: the drug addicts, the mentally ill and the homeless. Our world is not their world. What many of them have in common is an offensive odor, a foul smell due to poor bathing habits that discourages us from making contact with them.

Christ invites us to take a risk by reaching out to them.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched a leper. By doing so, he incurred the penalty of being declared "unclean" by the religious authorities.

Christ cares about us. That is one reason why the lepers were so touched by Christ's concern for them. Their gratitude was an understandable response to the Divine Mercy.