



February 11, 2024

Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand, touched the leper, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." Mark 1:42



Dear Friends;

When I was first ordained back in 1985 the AIDS crisis was worsening. As a priest I was called many times to anoint someone who was dying from (at this time) a scary disease. In the 80's, they did not know how exactly it was transmitted. People were paranoid. When visiting a person with AIDS you had to follow all kinds of protocols: gown, gloves, mask, shield. Some medical personnel would not work with AIDS patients. When you heard that someone had HIV or AIDS it seemed like an automatic death sentence.

People with AIDS often were ostracized because of fear or moral judgments. Thousands of people were dying. Not everyone contracted AIDS because of sexual activity. I once worked with a nun who contracted AIDS because of a blood transfusion she had received during surgery. She kept it quiet because of the shame that people with AIDS were made to feel.

In the ancient world they did not have the science of immunology. They did not know how diseases were transmitted. What was called leprosy in the Old and New Testaments was not the same thing as what we call Hansen's disease. There is no archeological evidence of Hansen's disease in the ancient Middle East. What is described in the biblical literature is a repulsive scaly condition. Leviticus describes something like severe psoriasis. It seems that dry flakes of skin get left on clothes, walls, and furniture. This was something serious to the ancients.

Their concern stemmed from their concept of holiness. The Book of Leviticus states, "*Be holy as the Lord your God is holy.*" Holiness encompassed many qualities, not least of these was bodily integrity and wholeness. Leviticus commands that anyone with physical imperfections was clearly not holy. And the person with leprosy must live alone, apart from the community. In the gregarious Middle Eastern culture this was a death sentence.

What is most important to this story is Jesus touches the leper who has been cut-off from God's people. This violates cultural taboos. The concern of Leviticus was not that it was "catchy" or infectious but rather it was polluting. One who becomes ritually polluted is also cut-off from being able to be part of the community and worship God. Jesus challenges his culture's judgment. In Jesus' view the leper's problem was not that he was polluted but cut-off from community. With his touch Jesus restores the man to full solidarity with God and the community. Jesus sees the illness not as an obstacle but an opportunity to restore the human family.

Recently, I was speaking with someone about the Corona Virus vaccine. We spoke of the reason why scientists were able to come up so quickly with the vaccine. It was because the Corona Virus is in the same family of viruses as HIV/AIDS. For over twenty years, scientists have been working on these viruses. If it were not for AIDS, we may still be battling the COVID epidemic. God can help us bring good out of bad! We need to be brave enough to touch those in need.

Peace,

Fr Ron

Esta carta está en español en el sitio web: www.anne.church