

## Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46; 1Corinthians 10:31-11:1; and Mark 1:40-45

Two lines in our readings overwhelm me. The first is "The leper shall dwell apart, making his/her abode outside of the camp." ¡Ay caramba! When a person needed community the most, the person was forced to leave it. This was done out of concern for the community's relationship with God, but it sounds devastating to me – for both the leper and the community.

Purity was important in ancient Judaism, because it showed that the people were striving to be worthy of God's presence in their midst. God's gift should not be taken for granted. The aim was to live as close to perfection as in the first days of Creation. Israelite law helped the community to be free of blemish, physically as well as in communal behaviors and attitudes. This was a community affair because God formed a covenant with them as a whole, not as individuals.

Leviticus 13 details how Temple priests could help the overall community be pure of *šērā 'at*, a term for a variety of skin problems and strange growths on fabrics and the walls of personal dwellings, translated here as leprosy. (Those who have male-pattern baldness will be relieved to know Leviticus discusses your situation and deems you not *šērā 'at*.) At issue was not so much protection from physical disease as it was the impurity, which would cut the whole community off from God.

However, I think this is an example of humans misunderstanding what God wants. We certainly need to do our best to live in a way that reveres and respects God, but we must also keep in mind that we can never be worthy. What's more, God is okay with filling in what is missing. Life is about growth; God loves both who we are and who we will become. Recall the name God gives Godself in Ex 34, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love and faithfulness." My guess is that God wants to help lepers become pure, not exile them.

In our gospel, the leper seems to have guessed the same thing. He boldly walks into a crowd and walks right up to Jesus, who embodies God's compassion. The leper prays most appropriately: by kneeling, begging, acknowledging Jesus' power and stating what he needs. Jesus does not say to him, "Go outside the camp before you cut everyone off from God." Rather, Jesus is moved with pity, touches this humble, needy person and heals him. The leper worships righteously and God responds righteously.

The second line that overwhelms me is the final line of this gospel, "People kept coming to him from everywhere." So many people needed to be healed! Isn't that the truth for all of us, in every age? We have each been declared unclean in some way. Some are bullied, while the crowd goes along with it to save themselves. Some are excluded because of race, economic status, gender or education. Some have a disability. Some of us broke the law or failed to be a success. Some have a mental illness or have grown old. Each of us carries a sense of being unclean, because, truth be told, we are unclean. We are not perfect. None of us are whole. And, we yearn to end our isolation. We yearn to connect with God. We yearn to move back inside the camp and live with our community. Jesus sees this in us and is moved with pity for each of us, here, today. The reality of God's desire to heal each one of us is something to sit with today and every day.

And once we have felt that healing hand touch us, love swells up within us and we are turned outward. We will wonder why we sent others to live outside the camp. Why do we exclude anyone? How could we have thought that the isolation of anyone else would bring *us* closer to God?

Thus, Paul tells the Corinthians, "I try to please everyone in every way, not seeking my own benefit but that of the many, that they may be saved." This is his moral compass: choose to do what helps others come to God, not what keeps them away. Paul acts as a bridge, not a barrier, to God. Just as Jesus built a bridge for Paul, it is Paul's turn, and ours, to do the same for others.

- ❖ Sit with God's desire to heal you and bring you back into the camp.
- ❖ How can you be a bridge, not a barrier, to God for others?