

[Readings: Lev. 13:1-2, 44-46; Ps. 32: 1 Cor 10:31-11; Mark 1:40-45]

The leper in today's Gospel is not a man who lived 2,000 years ago. It is you and me. The Gospel tells the story of how Jesus cures a leper and then tells him to show himself to the priest. It happens in a beautiful exchange that shows the leper's faith and Jesus' love.

"If you wish, you can make me clean," says the leper. Jesus touches him and says: "I do will it. Be made clean." Then Jesus says: "But go, show yourself to the priest." Why does he need to show himself to the priest? The first reading explains: The priest is the one who declares him unclean. If he is clean, he can be reincorporated into the community. If unclean, he would have to stay separate from his family and friends, and shout, "Unclean! Unclean!" before him wherever he goes. 🗺️ The reason for this, in primitive times, is clear: The diseased person would contaminate others.

It sounds harsh to us. We are used to the New Testament's mercy and its inclusion of new people (Samaritans, sinners, Gentiles, etc.). The Old Testament's rules seem almost cruel.

But they aren't cruel -- and if we are not careful, we can easily miss the wisdom of the Old Testament that the New Testament incorporates.

Consider today's Second Reading. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God," says St. Paul. "Avoid giving offense, whether to the Jews or Greeks or the church of God."

In other words, even we are asked to avoid contaminating the community by "ostracizing" certain parts of ourselves. Only for us, it isn't external factors, or parts of our history, that make us "unclean." It is our moral behavior right now.

Sin is the disease that ruins people. It is every bit as infectious, disfiguring and deadly as leprosy. If I participate in the evils that haunt our time, I become a moral threat. If I indulge in lust, I draw others with me; if I am greedy, I perpetuate a cycle of greed; if I am envious or angry, my gossip and backbiting will spread; if I am proud, I make my family miserable; if I am gluttonous or slothful, I shut down sacrificial love for others.

That puts us in exactly the position of the leper. Jesus can make me clean if he wills it — and he does will it.

In a broken and fractured world, people are torn apart by distance rather than illness. They are separated due to ignorance and prejudice. People are broken by addictions. They are lacking the true compassion that is found in humility, but only experience pity rooted in arrogance. People are living outside the community of believers as a result of a failure to lovingly embrace the sinner while seeking to remove the sin. The healing touch of Jesus fails to reach the broken because unlike in today's Gospel, we and others fail to call out to Jesus. We fail to realize that we are in need of healing or think we are undeserving of it.

Today is the World Day of Prayer for the Sick. It is also the weekend dedicated to World Marriage Sunday. Lent begins this Wednesday. This is our opportunity to call out to Jesus like the leper in the Gospel of today. It is our time to realize we have need of healing. What is your need this year? Is it an addiction, a bad habit, a sinful past that has been eating at you for years, or an event that happened to you that has never been spoken about and needs to come out so that you can move towards a better life? What is your leprosy? In some ways we are all unclean, but we try to hide it. The passage in the Old Testament spoke about tearing your garment to bear the disease. We too must rend our hearts to bear our sin before the Lord. Why hide in caves, in the darkness, when Jesus comes to heal and bring us into the light? Why hide behind a mask of denial, when we can live free from false images and vanity?

The Lord wants to heal you. He wants to give us new life. Leave behind the sinful past and be embraced by Jesus. This Lent will only be different if we seek to lay ourselves open before the Lord. This Lent will be different if we are willing to be different than we are; to be who we are capable of being. What is so great about sin that we should want to hold on to it? Today is the day to cry out to Jesus because he does want to heal you. Hear his voice calling to you; "I do will it. Be made clean".

One of the more popular phrases during the Lenten season is "Give Up." It works for singles, for married couples and for this sick. It works for all of us!

Craig Gates of Jackson, MS, tells us "What to Give up for Lent:"

GIVE UP grumbling! Instead, "In everything give thanks." Constructive criticism is OK, but "moaning, groaning, and complaining" are not Christian disciplines.

GIVE UP 10 to 15 minutes in bed! First thing in the morning and the last thing at night, use that time in prayer, Bible study and personal devotion.

GIVE UP looking at other people's worst points. Instead concentrate on their best points. We all have faults. It is a lot easier to have people overlook our shortcomings when we overlook theirs first.

GIVE UP speaking unkindly. Instead, let your speech be generous and understanding. It costs so little to say something kind and uplifting. Why not check that sharp tongue at the door?

GIVE UP your hatred of anyone or anything! Instead, learn the discipline of love. "Love covers a multitude of sins."

GIVE UP your worries and anxieties! Instead, trust God with them. Anxiety is spending emotional energy on something we can do nothing about: like tomorrow! Live today and let God's grace be sufficient.

GIVE UP TV one evening a week! Instead, visit some lonely or sick person. There are those who are isolated by illness or age. Why isolate yourself in front of the "tube?" Give someone a precious gift: your time!

GIVE UP buying anything but essentials for yourself! Instead, give the money to God. The money you would spend on the luxuries could help someone meet basic needs. We are called to be stewards of God's riches, not consumers.

GIVE UP judging by appearances and by the standard of the world! Instead, learn to give up yourself to God. There is only one who has the right to judge, Jesus Christ.

"If you wish, you can make me clean," says the leper. "I do will it. Be made clean." "But go, show yourself to the priest." AMEN!