

[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 just the 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 why: 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. Kind of like our current COVID situation, no? 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 World Marriage Sunday. The theme for this year is, "To Have, to Hold, and to Honor. It's also St. Valentine's Day. On top of that, Lent begins this Wednesday. So, how will Fr. Nick weave all three themes of leprosy, marriage and Lent all together?!

Lent 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. 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. 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."

And now, some words of encouragement to our married couples.

God loves everyone -- and He calls us to love selflessly, without expectation of something in return. Love is given utmost importance in His Word. We are expected to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind—and to love our neighbor, too. What is love? The 'Love Verse' at 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 is an often-quoted Scripture (usually at weddings) reminding us that love is patient and kind; not envious, boastful, or full of pride. How can we apply this in 2021?

By loving God. You build your relationship with God when you include God in your married life. Make time for prayer together. Open God's Word together. Share your faith stories with your children and grandchildren. Praying regularly, going to church, and spending time with our church family will also encourage us in our love for Him, but there is more we need to do. Loving God means loving others -- an important detail we must never overlook.

Remember that love is bigger than feelings. Love is more than just an emotion. Feeling can be a part of love -- we have romantic relationships, share friendships, and develop a fondness for other people -- but feelings and emotions do not define it. Love is also action, service, courtesy, and forgiveness. You don't have to carry the feeling of love in order to share love with others. Love is a choice. We can choose to respond thoughtfully in any situation when we allow our decisions to be guided by His love.

Love Is Hospitality. Open your heart to your spouse. When you provide unconditional, irrevocable, pure love and forgiveness for your spouse, you provide a new level of growth and intimacy. It simply means we treat our spouse with respect -- regardless of whether they show us respect in return. Love through prayer. Love through attentiveness. Love through action. We know how it feels to be on the receiving end of love, so how wonderful it is also to spread love to others.

Seek the healing of your inner leprosy, celebrate your marriage, and enter this Lent with a heart full of love. AMEN!