

Homily – 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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

When I was a kid, I visited my older brother in the hospital where he was diagnosed with hepatitis. I remember a sign on the door about him being quarantined and that all visitors must check with nurses' station and we had to use mask, gloves and gown when we went into his room. When I think about that today, I had to feel bad for him. It made it seem like an outcast to society...and I am sure I was a little scared about 'catching' something. But at least the doctors were able to treat his condition and he was eventually back to his normal self.

That was not the case back in Jesus' day even up to the middle of the last century. When people were seen as infected, they were isolated from the community. No one would care for them, no matter how sick they were. They were seen to be unclean. In fact, wherever they went, they had to continually shout, "Unclean, Unclean." So these poor people with one of the many diseases included in the category of leprosy, were forced to live completely isolated from society, with no one to care for them, hoping that some kind people would leave them food or even some garbage for them to go through. If they walked from one place to another, they had to call out "Unclean" not just so people could avoid them, but so the people could be protected from the evil that must have done this to them. And then Jesus came.

Jesus cured lepers. He did not see people who were unclean. He saw people who were suffering and he cared for them, and healed them. They would not have to go around calling out, "Unclean anymore."

Instead of an apple-a-day, could a hug-a-day keep the doctor away? According to new research from Carnegie Mellon University, that may not be that far-fetched. Researchers found that "greater social support and more frequent hugs protected people from the increased susceptibility to infection associated with being stressed. And this resulted in less severe illness symptoms." The Carnegie Mellon scientists said their research not only suggests that being hugged by a trusted person may act as an effective means of conveying support, but also that increasing the frequency of hugs might reduce the deleterious effects of stress.

In today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus confronts a man faced with the overwhelming stress of serious illness, and is desperately seeking the healing touch of Jesus. The man was afflicted with leprosy. He says to Jesus, "If you want to, you can cure me." Jesus is moved with pity. He stretches His hand out, touches the leper, and says, "Of course I want to. Be cured!" And the leper is cured. I think Jesus believed in the hug-a-day theory.

In Biblical times, the word “leprosy” designated several kinds of mangy, scaly, skin diseases. The man whom Jesus confronts was rightly troubled because he was afflicted with the kind of skin disease that caused him to be ostracized from his people - certainly a man no one would dare offer a hug. Under the Jewish Law, severe measures were taken to prevent the spread of skin diseases. The afflicted person was isolated from the community and not allowed to enter settled areas. He was required to give clear warning to other people of his condition, so that they might avoid getting close to him. If the disease was curable, the leper was able to resume his life in the community, but only after a priest had verified his cure and performed the purification rite required by law.

By approaching Jesus, this leper makes a bold move. Not only does he violate the law, but he risks encountering the familiar reaction of horror and revulsion at the sight of a leper. His plea, ‘if you wish’... shows his utter confidence in Jesus’ power. He doesn’t ask Jesus to heal him but to make him clean.

At the sight of this afflicted man, Jesus is moved with pity. And as the bystanders look on with astonishment, Jesus stretches out his hand and touches him. Jesus did not only make a leper clean but he also healed and saved him.

To be isolated from family and friends is one of the hardest lot that could befall any human being. This was the sad lot of lepers in Old Testament times and into New Testament days as well. We are social beings by nature, and loss of contact or isolation from others stunts our mental growth.

We have been created for community and are called to live our faith in and with a community. Isolation and independence is contrary to Christianity. Every Sunday when we celebrate the Eucharist we celebrate as a community. In community we are to make Jesus real. Love is the characteristic of the Christian community.

Our psyches are made up of both the physical and the spiritual. Lately, I have been looking at my own (personal) mortality. At 68 years of age, the major portion of my life is behind me. To those of you are millennials, I am ancient. To those of you who are middle aged, I am a ‘senior.’ And to those of you in the over 60 crowd, I am just a ‘young whopper-snapper.” But the fact remains, my remaining life span on this earth is not a long one.

As in all of us, there is a little bit of “leprosy” in my spiritual nature. There are times that I feel unclean because I know that I have stumbled and need forgiveness. Being a deacon does not give me a clear path to sainthood. The blemishes on the skin of my soul were left there by things I have done (or failed to do) in my life.

Many of these blemishes have been cured by the loving touch of Jesus in my asking for forgiveness through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

When I come before the Lord, he doesn't see my sin. He sees me as someone He loves who is hurting. And He heals me. The same applies to all of us. When we fall, and we are caught by the Lord and we ask for forgiveness, he heals us.

There are also two kinds of hugs I seek out. One I receive here every Sunday from this Community. You are the embodiment of the physical Christ to me and to those around you. You don't see my blemishes (or anyone else's for that matter). You just 'hug' me.

Then, there is the spiritual 'hug.' That's the one I seek every night when I pray before I go to sleep. I ask Jesus to heal me and help me be the person he wants me to be. And I ask for and get another 'hug' – a spiritual hug - in return.

Oh – and just to be clear – I am not looking to leave this world any time soon, but I do want to be prepared.

On Wednesday we begin our Lenten journey. It is a good time to think about approaching Jesus, who will willingly remove our 'spiritual leprosy' by the power of his own holiness, and restore our communion with others and making us fully qualified to enter into God's presence.

There will be Reconciliation Services in the Dayton area in March and we at Qac have scheduled a Soup Supper & Reconciliation Service on Wednesday, Mar 18th. Hopefully, we will take advantage of these opportunities to seek out the healing touch of Jesus in our lives and take time to truly listen to Jesus speaking to our hearts and in return, receiving from him a spiritual 'hug.'

SIDE NOTE: As is mentioned in our bulletin, today we honor the memories of David Michael Jennings and his grandparents, Marie & Robert, who left this life exactly 10 years ago today. David Michael was a bright star in our lives and his spiritual maturity was well beyond his years. He is a product of faith filled families – both sets of grandparents and loving parents, Dave & Kristi. Our love and support continues for the Jennings family. David Michael will live as long as he is remembered in our hearts and minds.

Deacon Greg Cecere
February 15, 2015
(with excerpts from Fr Joe Pellegrino)