

Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Year B

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46

Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 11

I Cor 10: 31 - 11:1

Mark 1: 40-45

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The evangelist Mark paints today's gospel with a very spare brush. The story lasts for just six lines. We don't hear what Jesus looked like, or what the leper looked like, or if the weather was lovely or chilly. We don't hear about the response of the crowds, or what anyone was wearing, or if there were trees or fields or a well nearby. All the details we would see in a painting, all the colors and facial expressions and backgrounds we would find in a play or a movie, all the information a simple black-and-white photograph would give us, are nowhere to be found in this story. Mark pares everything down to this: A leper comes to Jesus, kneels and begs; Jesus is filled with mercy and heals the leper; Jesus commands the leper to tell no one except the priest; the leper disobeys, and Jesus must go out into the desert to escape the crush of the mob. That's the whole story.

Well, except for one small detail, easily overlooked but enormously important. Mark tells us this: "Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, 'I do will it. Be made clean.'" Jesus touches the leper. This simple action has enormous implications for everyone involved: Jesus, the leper, the crowd, and us.

First, the people of Jesus' time knew that diseases could be spread by touch. They did not understand the causes - they had no knowledge of germs and viruses - but they knew that close contact could pass sickness. That is one of the reasons lepers were ostracized, as we hear in today's reading from Leviticus: "As long as the sore is on him he shall declare himself unclean, since he is in fact unclean. He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp." So anyone watching the interaction between Jesus and the leper would have shuddered in fear and disgust, just as we would recoil if we saw a doctor operate without washing his hands first and putting on gloves, or if we saw someone use a needle that had just been used by a person with hepatitis or AIDS. In Jesus' day, they knew enough to keep someone with leprosy away from everyone else, out of the cities, in deserted places. They knew enough not to touch lepers.

Second, Jesus didn't have to touch the man at all. Sometimes Jesus does touch the people he heals (as in last week's gospel, when Jesus takes the hand of Peter's mother-in-law and cures her fever), and sometimes he doesn't (as in the gospel two weeks ago, when Jesus drives the demon out of the man in the synagogue in Capernaum simply by saying, "Come out of him!"). Recall how Jesus cured the centurion's servant without being anywhere near him, and how he called forth Lazarus from the tomb. Jesus doesn't have to touch the leper to heal him. With a single command, Jesus can make the leper clean.

But imagine how long it has been since anyone touched this man. We don't know how long he has been sick - maybe many years. In that time, in those years, he never shook the hand of a healthy man, never accidentally brushed against a woman in the marketplace, never bumped into anyone entering or leaving the synagogue, because he was never allowed in any of those places, never allowed near anyone healthy. So as shocked as someone looking at this scene might have been, imagine how startled, how absolutely rocked to his core the man himself must have been at the simple

act of being touched by a fellow, healthy human being.

Third, Jesus could have caught leprosy by doing this. Sometimes, people think such things as touching lepers were easy for Jesus, because he was divine and therefore free from danger. But nothing in the Scriptures and nothing in our Tradition teaches this. We have no reason to think that Jesus was immune to illness, no reason to think that as a baby he didn't get earaches, no reason to think that as a man he didn't get colds, flu and headaches. Our faith is that Jesus was like us in all things but sin, not sickness. We know Jesus got tired, and needed to sleep. We know he needed food. We know he was mortal: he could be killed. So we have no reason to think that in touching this leper, there was no risk for Jesus. The risk was great. Jesus of Nazareth could have contracted leprosy by touching this leper.

Today's gospel is about risk. We are in exactly the same position as Jesus. We may not be able to cure physical illness, but we can touch the lives of those who are sick. We can reach out to those whose bodies have been beaten down by poverty and addiction. We can freely choose to enter the hospitals and nursing facilities and private homes of family, friends, and neighbors who are sick. We can expose ourselves to those unpleasant smells, confront the spectrum of awful things that can go wrong with the human body, and see on the bed and hear in the coughing a premonition of what may lie ahead for us.

There is risk in this. The risk of sacrifice, as our free time and our patience are drained by the needs of men and women who are not beautiful, cheerful, and gracious, but who are frightened and wasted and angry. The risk of suffering, as we who are well willingly touch the lives of the sick with our compassion, and so share their pain, and take on some of the weight of their cross. The risk of ingratitude, when those we visit and comfort and serve do not even say "thanks."

But that risk is what it all comes down to. God so loved the world that He sent his only Son, took the risk of being human, placed Himself in our hands, and *lost*, becoming an outcast, a mocked criminal hanging on a cross.

Is there any risk involved in our faith in Jesus Christ? Do we take any chances by following him? Is being a disciple a "safe bet" for us? When the way is broad and the road is smooth and things are going our way, we are happy to be Christians. Following Christ when the music plays and the incense wafts and the bells chime and the choir sings and the sunlit saints of brilliant glass watch over us is wonderful, and we give ourselves over to the Lord with glad hearts. When unexpected joy runs through our veins, when generosity is born in us like early spring, when peace binds us with our families and friends - well, then we raise the cry, "Amen! Thy will be done!"

But when we are sitting at home or at work, and we know there is someone sick we should visit, someone sick we should touch, someone sick we should sacrifice our time and risk our happiness for - what then? Do we think, "Thy will be done!", or do we come up with reasons, many good reasons, to put off that visit for another day?

We gladly imitate the Christ who joins in the wedding feast at Cana. We happily imitate the Christ who greets the children. We willingly greet the Christ who says to us, "Your sins are forgiven."

But the Christ who touches the sick? How willingly, how happily, how often do we take the risk of following where he leads?