

Homily for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
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In the early 1980s AIDS became a household word. It is an incurable, contagious, terrifying disease spreading across the world and targeting most frequently specific groups of people. The news agencies told us these people were infecting our blood supplies and absolutely needed to be isolated from the rest of us normal healthy people. HIV is extremely susceptible to mutation, which makes it difficult to design an effective solution. Despite significant advances in medicine, an effective vaccine for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is still not available, although recent hope has emerged through the discovery of antibodies capable of neutralizing diverse HIV strains. In 2016, 18,160 people received an AIDS diagnosis. Since the epidemic began 1,232,346 people have received an AIDS diagnosis. Now some 40 years later news of this ongoing epidemic has all but disappeared from reporting agencies. I suppose there is just no sense in panicking the general population. No telling what we normal people might do.

This Sunday's first reading from the *Book of Leviticus* gives just a few of the seemingly horrible rules established by the Mosaic community to protect itself from leprosy. In ancient times leprosy was in fact deforming, incurable and contagious. Leprosy back then included most skin disorders: Hansen's disease which is leprosy proper, psoriasis, skin cancer, boils and even serious acne. If it looked like leprosy it was leprosy. Lepers were ostracized by their families and neighbors, and forced to live outside the villages and towns. They were referred to as the Living Dead. Lepers had to wear ragged clothes. They had to let their hair go uncombed and uncut. As today's reading says, they had to cover their mouths with one hand and call out "Unclean, unclean" as they walked. Anyone who came into any contact whatsoever with a leper was considered unclean like the leper. Today we have a cure for leprosy.

Jesus, moved with pity, stretched out his hand, touched the leper who knelt before him, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." Then Jesus sent him to the priest so that he could be welcomed back into the community according to the law. Jesus did not see the leper as something unclean, nor did he fear the contagious disease ravaging his body. He was not concerned with the strict prohibitions of Jewish society. Jesus did not see a leper at all; he saw a human soul in desperate need. He stretched out his hand and touched him. He healed him with his touch and healed his relationship with the community through the priest. Jesus gave this power to his disciples. At the conclusion of the *Gospel of Mark*, Jesus provides a list of signs that his followers will perform. Among these signs is this one: they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.

We possess the wonderful capacity to be instruments of the healing power of Christ. Therefore, we have the duty not only to pray for the sick and to help them get effective medical help, but also to pray over them and extend the touch of Christ to them. Paul challenges the Corinthians and us to imitate Christ. We are to be ministers of healing. Our social, hospital and prison ministers regularly answer this call from Christ. We are each called to touch not just the physically sick, but all those whose lives are hurting and need healing in any way possible. It is simply not Christian to ostracize anyone for any reason whatsoever. In Christian society, even

those with the most contagious diseases are to be cared for in a way that gives them dignity and love in imitation of Christ.

How about those who have left the Church, left Christianity? Are they to be cared for as those who are very sick? Absolutely! How about those who are spiritually sick? Are our sins like a scab or pustule or blotch which appears to be a mortal wound to our soul? Does our conscience cry out to us, "Unclean, unclean?" Does Reconciliation fill us with dread or does it console us in times of trouble and bring us healing? Thank you Lord that sins are most often not visible. Those who are not in a state of grace are always welcomed back into the body of Christ when they seek to return. For example, even in the extremely rare cases of excommunication, such as when someone performs or assists in abortions, that person can always seek forgiveness and re-entry into the community. Each of us kneels before Jesus in the person of the priest and we hear Christ say, "I do will it. Be made clean." And we are welcomed back into the community according to the law.

And yet, many people throw children or relatives out of their lives. "You are no longer my son, my daughter," a parent hisses. Is there ever a situation where there is no longer any possibility of healing, of mercy, of extending the hand of Christ to those who seek reconciliation? Not in Christianity. The Forgiving Father may not have been able to give his Prodigal Son the remainder of the farm. That belongs to the Elder Brother. But he can welcome the prodigal back into the family. The person who has hurt his or her spouse and children may not be able to resume his or her place in the marriage, but that person still can receive the forgiveness, the healing he or she longs for. The convicted murderer may never be able to re-assume a place in free society, but he can be forgiven and given an opportunity to turn to God while incarcerated.

When we allow ourselves to be so overcome by hurt and hatred that we refuse to extend the healing hand of the Lord to others, we take upon ourselves the sickness of the other person. Hatred kills love. When we allow hatred to be part of our lives, we commit spiritual suicide. We cannot allow hatred to destroy us. Even in the wake of Moslem terrorism, even faced with the reality that there are many people in the world who hate us and who want us dead simply because we are Americans, we cannot allow hatred to destroy our humanity. Yes, we take measures to protect ourselves from those who would destroy us. Still, we do not have the right to hate anyone or any people and at the same time call ourselves Christian. Paul says, "Avoid giving offense to the Jews or Greeks or the church of God."

The Gospel often notes that Jesus was moved with pity for the people as he preached the Kingdom of God. When he faced the troubled, the abandoned, the sick, when stirred by the blind, and today, when face to face with a leper, Jesus was moved not by disgust, not by antagonism, but by compassion. Having compassion and showing mercy are the Christian qualities of great minds and large hearts. Today we are called to allow our hearts to be enlarged by Christianity.