

6th Sunday
2/14/2021

HEARTS THAT ARE COMPASSIONATE AND MERCIFUL

Coronavirus can attack without apparent warning. If infected, one must quarantine in a way that can result in isolation, loneliness, loss of income and the ability to worship in person. As difficult as all these measures are, the goal is to protect the common good. Sometimes we have to make sacrifices for that common good as a way of loving our neighbor as ourselves. Think about everything we've been dealing with regard to Covid the last eleven months, amplify it ten or more times, and you may get an idea of what leprosy was like in biblical times.

Leprosy is a horrifying disease. Whether it be some type of skin condition or the full blown version of what today we call Hansen's Disease. This disease was not only horrible in and of itself as the first reading reminds us. Although the goal was the common good, leprosy was a point of separation; from one's home, one's profession, from one's family and friends, and from worship in the temple. It was dehumanizing, a type living death. It figuratively and literally put people on the peripheries, the edges of society. Truly isolated, their only companions would be other lepers.

This leprous man we meet in the gospel, breaks the law in approaching Jesus and it could be a capital offense. He doesn't ask to be healed but to be cleansed. And actually, he doesn't even ask Jesus. He simply makes a statement to Jesus and yet that statement is an expression of trust and faith: *If you wish, you can make me clean.* Jesus shows compassion which literally means, *co-suffering*. Jesus is moved with pity which means, *a stirring of the gut*.

Pope Francis has said, *We cannot understand the works of Christ, we cannot understand Christ himself, if we do not enter his compassionate and merciful heart.* Jesus is deeply moved and he does something unusual as well: he touches the leper. Now to touch a leper is to be made unclean oneself. *I do will it. Be made clean.* Jesus words are effective. They do what he says. In this instance a touch doesn't spread infection, but instead spreads a cleansing. Jesus isn't made unclean but rather he cleanses this man of his leprosy. The movement isn't from clean to unclean but from unclean to clean.

No doubt this man is grateful. Jesus restores him to health, to his place in society, to other people. Although Jesus wants him to remain quiet about this, this cleansed man won't do it. He may be grateful but his actions are ungrateful.

There are three lessons in this for us. First, Jesus is compassionate and as his disciples we're called to reflect his compassion to others, particularly to those in need. Jesus reached out to others and we're called to that as well, particularly to those who have been pushed to edges of society or outside society: the unborn, the poor, the imprisoned and others. When Mother Teresa died, it was said in her life serving the poorest of the poor she was remembering those who many of us wanted to forget. Reaching out can be something as simple as calling up someone we know who is lonely or grieving. There are many ways of reaching out and touching those in need and when we do so and we can serve Christ in them.

Second, sin is a type of leprosy. Sin separates and divides us from God and from each other and even from ourselves. Sin is a type of disfigurement that can isolate us and dehumanize us. Simply take a second thinking of a sin or struggle in your life and let this man's prayer become yours. *If you wish, you can make me clean.* Think about what it is... and in your heart quietly say to Jesus, *If you wish, you can make me clean.* As Jesus is more powerful than leprosy, so too Jesus is more powerful than sin and offers us restoration—particularly through the Sacrament of Reconciliation which is a cleansing and a healing in our lives. There we hear Jesus give us his response: *I do will it. Be made clean.*

Finally, when Jesus asks us to do something, may we do it and not do the opposite. That can be hard because we all want our own way but perhaps that's why Jesus taught us to pray, *Thy will be done.* Because he wouldn't stay quiet, the now cleansed leper seems to have hampered Jesus' work. Our goal is not to impede the work but of Jesus but to allow it to continue, through us, in who we are and in what we do.

We cannot understand the works of Christ, we cannot understand Christ himself, if we do not enter his compassionate and merciful heart. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation we enter into the compassionate merciful heart of Jesus. Here in the Eucharist, Jesus opens his compassionate and merciful heart to us. Here Jesus' words are effective as he continues to say, *This is my body* and *This is the chalice of my blood.* Here we seek to respond in every little way with lives of intentional faith and lives of generous love, with hearts that, like the heart of Jesus, are merciful and compassionate.