

Ordinary 6

2.11.24

Lepers are everywhere. Not the cute, spotted, fast-running animals featured on Animal Planet. But “lepers” – L-E-P-E-R-S. They are on the loose. And they are everywhere.

I ran across a leper the other day. I was driving in a crowded parking lot looking for an open space. The leper was in front of me coming in my direction. He put his left hand out his car window indicating to me in no uncertain terms, “that is MY spot.” I saw him. I didn’t intend to take his parking spot. Fearing a hostile takeover however, the leper sped up, cutting in front of me and just missed hitting my car. I skidded to a stop. I rolled down the passenger window and screamed, “I had the right of way! I wasn’t going to take your precious spot! You almost hit me!” The leper came out of his car and approached me. He was elderly. He stated, “but didn’t you see my left arm extended toward the spot?” “I did,” I screamed back. And I added, “I had the right of way. I wasn’t going to take your spot.” The leper demurred. He said, “I’m sorry, my friend.” And he made a bowing gesture toward me.

I reflected on my encounter with the leper. “I could have handled that better,” I admitted to myself. I should have been more patient. And less dramatic. As I mulled this over in my head it dawned on me that I was dressed in my clerical collar.

Every so often I see a leper and the leper’s very young child standing near our church on Sunday. They hold up a sign and ask for money. I’ve seen this leper or a relative of this leper at every church I’ve been assigned to for the last several decades. In the past, I simply chased the leper off the property. But a number of years ago, I changed the way I approach the leper. I talk with the leper. I ask her for her name. I ask if she’s hungry and if she is, I’ll get her some food. Or I invite her and her child to our parish breakfast. She never wants food. She almost always just wants money. I invite the leper to meet with our St. Vincent de Paul Society. “We can help with an electric or water bill,” I explain. But the leper usually refuses. In recent years I wonder, “is the leper being forced to beg for money? Is she being trafficked?” I try to approach that topic with her and make an offer to help. The leper usually backs off or away. I always review how I’ve interacted with the leper. I hope my approach is a little better today than it has been in the past.

I see the leper on TV every once in a while. When the leper appears, I mutter to no one but myself, “I don’t understand you. I don’t get you.” And the Christ-voice inside my head tells me that I am called to love that person. To love them as they are. To be honest, that person makes me uncomfortable. I still don’t understand them. But I am trying to figure out how to love them as they are...and as they deserve.

Lepers are those people who are different from us. They are sometimes difficult to deal with. They can be diffident and sometimes are in our face. Sometimes these lepers are nice. At other times they are mean and confrontational. There’s a good chance that our lepers see us as lepers too.

The Book of Leviticus, which was the source for our first reading today, describes the proper behavior for the leper. These individuals, as understood in that book, are afflicted with various skin maladies which were often contagious and many times fatal. The Book of Leviticus prescribes that these individuals had to remove themselves from the community. Doing so was a way to keep others healthy – physically and spiritually. But, doing so was also a potential death sentence – since these individuals would die without the financial, protective, and social support of their families and loved ones.

Jesus knew Hebrew Law. He was a Rabbi, after all. He knew that as a healthy person, he was to avoid lepers – for his own good health and the continued good health of his circle of family and friends. But Jesus contravenes the Law. He engages with the leper – which the Law forbids. He touches the leper – a more serious violation of the Law and a means to possible physical and ritual contamination. And then he does what no one else can do. Jesus heals. He brings physical healing to the leper. And, most importantly, he restores the leper to his family, his community, and full participation in his faith practices. He saves the leper’s physical life. He builds up and ensures the leper’s spiritual and eternal life.

There are lepers all around you as well. They're here in church. One might live in your home. They are certainly present in our neighborhoods. They are on TV. They work with us. They can be difficult. They might be quiet. And, because of our faith, they force us to ask if we love them, respect them, interact with them, and REALLY listen to them as Jesus commands. And more to the point, we are to understand and act that in those encounters we are really meeting and really treating Jesus himself – since the very life-breath of Christ exists in all people, even the leper.

As Catholics, we acknowledge that salvation is first and foremost a gift from God. It cannot be earned. That being said, our actions indicate just how well or how poorly we have accepted and embraced God's offer of salvation. While salvation is God's gift to us, it is also true that God will judge us according to how we have acted toward others – how we've listened to, loved, and valued others, especially those who we might consider leprous.

With that in mind, the other day I heard a very holy and wise person put it this way. While salvation is first and foremost a gift from God, our entry into the Kingdom and into heaven depends on the reference letters we carry with us. Specifically, those reference letters come from the lepers around us. Those letters contain details of our interaction with the leper.

Today's gospel tells us that the leprous man "publicized the whole matter" and "spread (his) report abroad." What is being proclaimed about you? What does the leper's reference letter say about you and about me? I don't know about you, my personnel file seems short on positive reference letters, especially from the lepers around me. It's time for me to get to work.