

Leprosy. Today it is called “Hansen’s Disease.” In 1873 it was Gerhard Hansen, a Norwegian physician, who discovered the bacteria that causes this disease. There are around 200,000 active cases of Hansen’s Disease throughout the world. About 150 or so are found in the US.

Having leprosy or Hansen’s Disease was thought to be a death sentence. Lepers were required to isolate themselves from the rest of the population for fear of infecting others. We might be familiar with one particular leper colony – the Hawaiian Island of Molokai, where Fr. Damien ministered in the mid to late 1800’s. The Catholic Church acknowledges that Fr. Damien is a saint for his dedicated ministry to those sisters and brothers who suffered with this disease.

In recent times, we know that Hansen’s Disease is extremely rare. It is curable by treating an infected patient with a regimen of antibiotics. And, it is only transmissible by having prolonged and very close contact with someone who is infected with the disease.

Despite the rarity of this illness, the ability to cure it, and the unlikelihood that the disease can be transmitted through casual contact, there is still great prejudice and fear regarding those who contract this illness. To that point, we still use language which reflects the stigma of Hansen’s Disease. It isn’t uncommon to hear someone say they are being treated like a leper by others. When that is said, the “leper” is speaking about

how others avoid them, cut them off, or push them away because they are different and not like us.

In our first reading from the Second Book of Kings, we meet Naaman. He is a military commander for the King of Aram – a land we know today by the names of Syria and northern Mesopotamia. Naaman discovers that he has contracted leprosy. Despite his status, he would be treated as an outcast. He is told by a servant girl who was an Israelite that he should see the prophet Elisha, who succeeded Elijah, one of the greatest prophets in all of Israel. That suggestion was bold. Arameans were hated by the Israelites because the Arameans often attacked the Israelites and their land. Nevertheless, Naaman travels to Israel. He meets up with Elisha. He bathes in the unremarkable waters of the river Jordan. And he is healed. I'm guessing the members of the Israelite community who heard this story would be confused and angry. They would be confused because no Israelite in his right mind would associate with an Aramean who was seen as an enemy and a threat. They would be angry that God healed a foreigner and a sworn enemy. Israelites understood that THEY were the chosen race. In their minds, that meant God would only heal members of the chosen race. But God had a different message for them. God reveals in this passage that he is Lord of all. All people have been created in his image and likeness. And God desires to bless all men and women. That would have been a shocking revelation and an almost impossible message for the Israelites to hear, let alone embrace.

In the gospel, Jesus touches on something similar. Ten lepers approach him. As lepers, they assumed their place outside the community, which was the religious and cultural norm of the

day. They were to be avoided, cut off, and figuratively pushed away because they posed a supposed threat to those who were healthy. But Jesus, perceiving the continued prejudice and fear of the people – something that hasn't changed since the Second Book of Kings was written some 500 years before – decided to address the same prejudice, hostility, and antagonism that was still persistent among his countrymen. He heals the ten lepers who approach him, including the dreaded Samaritan. As you know Samaritans and Jews would have nothing to do with one another. They hated each other, understanding that the other side degraded and undermined what they considered true or real religion. Jesus reminded his audience and us that all are equal in the eyes of God. All people are to be treated equally and lovingly – since that is what we, as individuals, expect God to do for us. He teaches that no one is to be cut off, avoided, or driven away because they are different from us. Rather, we are entrusted with the divine command to love others – because God loves us. What we expect for ourselves from God we must extend to others.

In this day and in our land, there are few if any individuals who are suffering from Hansen's Disease or leprosy. Despite that fact, we may sense that lepers abound. These lepers may not have the skin rash and possible disfigurement that accompanies this disease. The lepers in our lives can be those who are different from us, speak a different language, worship differently, look and dress in a way that is not what is normative for us. As is often the case with "lepers", that is, with those whom we fear because they are different from us, we tend to isolate them, cut them off, and drive them away.

Let me tell you two stories. In the year 2001, a new priest was assigned to the parish where I was in residence. He was from Tanzania. He was soft spoken and had a very heavy accent. After he celebrated his first Sunday Mass with the community, a good number of parishioners came up to me to complain about him. They said (and some demanded) that we should have an American priest and not some foreigner. In their eyes, he was a leper. I told the parishioners that the Church just isn't making as many American born priests any more. I told them that this priest left his native land. He had never flown on a plane. He had never even been on an escalator before. I'm sure he was afraid as he left everything familiar to him to come to this parish halfway around the world from his home in order to provide the Eucharist and the other sacraments...JUST FOR THEM. I told them they should be grateful. They should welcome him. And love him like Christ. It took a while. There were numerous bumps in the road along the way, but the parishioners eventually did just that. Twenty-five years later, the members of that parish still speak of that priest as their favorite among all who served their community.

There is another priest of our diocese who falls into the DACA category – Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. His parents brought him to the US when he was six. They overstayed their work visa and were deported. In the aftermath of that deportation, this young man stayed with his sister, went to college, entered the seminary and has served as a priest of our diocese for almost ten years. His sister became a citizen, but for various reasons he has not been able to do the same – although he wants nothing more than to become a citizen of the US. He has spent around \$50,000 of his own money - which is probably

the extent of his entire life savings - to help advance his case. Many people agree that this is an immigration policy in our country that needs to be addressed and requires fixing. It is a no-brainer. But no one in Congress wants to rectify this particular policy. A few years ago, when I shared this priest's story with my congregation, most were supportive of him but a handful said he should go back to the country where he was born. I told them if that happens, we will have to do away with some ministries since he was responsible for those ministries and would have to scale back our Mass schedule since he was responsible for several of those Masses as well. To the small group of parishioners I described, he was a leper.

Elisha, Jesus, and Fr. Damien dealt with lepers by speaking with them, getting to know them, and understanding their stories. They didn't immediately condemn them, cut them off, and cast them aside. They showed the love of God the Father in the way they treated them. Don't we want the same from God for ourselves? And if we want that for ourselves from God, then we are to necessarily extend that to others.

Who are the lepers in your life? Where are they in your world? Do you love them as Jesus commands? Do you serve them as he did? Today's readings remind us of what we are to do and how we are to love. Today we are reminded – no, we are commanded - to rid our world of leprosy in all its forms. We come to this Mass and are nourished by the Eucharist to do just that.

Amen? Amen!

PS – I have a little homework for you. Look up Pope Leo's Apostolic Exhortation on the vatican.org website. It's called Dilexi te (which translates "I have loved you...") and he published it on October 5th of this year. In particular read paragraphs 73-75 which touch on this topic. And then read the entire document. In those pages we are definitely challenged by and hopefully find comfort in the words of Pope Leo. In that document, Pope Leo speaks about how we are to practically live and love like Christ.