

## Seeing As Jesus Sees

February 12, 2012

Mark 1:40-45

In our Gospel Lesson for this morning we come face to face with the disease of Leprosy. Now today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although it can still be bad for those who contract it, leprosy is a curable disease and treatment in the early stages averts disability.

Multi-drug therapy, or MDT, is highly effective, and patients are no longer infectious to others after the first dose. Since 1995, the World Health Organization has provided MDT free of charge to patients throughout the world, and they report that there are virtually no relapses once treatment has been completed.

That is today, and we thank God for modern medicine. But in Biblical times, there was no disease regarded with more terror and no persons more ostracized by society than lepers.

Leprosy rendered the sufferers unclean. They were banished from being able to interact with others; they had to live outside the city, and as they moved around they were required to warn others of their polluted presence with the cry: "Unclean, unclean!" Even the mention of the name of this disease terrified people.

What a horrifying existence! Lepers not only had to bear the physical pain of their disease, they also had to bear the mental anguish and the heartbreak of being completely cut-off from human society and being totally shunned. This was Jewish Law.

And the law also said that anyone who had contact with an unclean person became unclean as well. A priest declared that person a leper and banished him from his home and the city. He was sent to live in a colony with other lepers until he either got better or died.

And the lepers rarely ever got better, because there was no known cure for the disease at that time. And because leprosy destroys nerve endings, lepers often unknowingly damaged their fingers, toes and noses, which just added to the misery.

So we can understand why some people threw rocks at lepers, to keep them at a safe distance.

And if all this wasn't bad enough, many different types of skin disease, some not nearly so bad, were also classified as leprosy, and those people suffered the same fate as the ones who had the real thing.

Just imagine – not only the physical suffering, but a life lived in isolation because no one wanted to even get close to you, much less have anything to do with you. You were an outcast by law.

But as we see in today's Gospel Lesson, a man with leprosy broke the Law by running up to Jesus and begging Him to cure him, to make him clean.

And here we have a very revealing picture of how Jesus sees humanity. He didn't drive away the man who had broken the law, or shun him or avoid him. Instead, Mark tells us that Jesus was "moved with compassion" for the man.

Now I should point out to you that this episode is also recorded in Matthew and Luke. Neither Matthew or Luke use the term "compassion." In fact some Greek manuscripts read "moved with anger." Some scholars have suggested that perhaps Jesus' humanity caused him to react with anger over the fact that disease could make another human being so miserable.

But the compassion was certainly there. All agree that "Jesus reached out and touched the man." And with the touch of Jesus' hand, the man was made clean and the leprosy left him!

Now, a study of the Gospels will clearly show that Jesus was much more concerned with mercy or the moral law of love than with the Ceremonial Law. For Jesus, people and relationships are more important than rituals and legalism.

And holiness, for our Lord, is a holiness that breaks down barriers between people. Jesus would not allow the Law of the land to crush compassion, and when it came to choosing one over the other.....Jesus chose compassion!

It wasn't just that Jesus looked at the leper and said, "You need something, I've got it. Come here. OK, now you're better." No, the word "compassion" suggests a depth of feeling. In fact, the word "compassion" literally means "to feel with."

Ten times in the gospels, we are told that Jesus had compassion on the people around him. What that means is that Jesus hurt when people around him hurt. It bothered him to see people suffering and in need. It touched his heart when someone came to him and said, "Please help me."

It was the compassion of Christ that caused Him to stretch out His hand and touch and cure the leper!

We can't think very long about Jesus Christ without marveling over all the people He stretched out His hand to touch and thus make clean or whole!

He took children into His arms; He laid hands on them and blessed them. He grasped the hand of the panicking Peter, who was sinking into the Sea of Galilee.....and He gently cleansed the feet of His disciples.....and instructed them, and us, to do the same for one another.

I think it is also clear in the gospels that, without a doubt, one of the reasons Jesus was eventually put to death was because He touched all the wrong people. At least the "wrong" people in the eyes of the religious and political leaders of the day, who were much more concerned about the letter of the law than with the spirit of the law.

Jesus could have healed the man with leprosy at a distance, but instead, Jesus overcame this man's isolation and touched Him! And this touching of suffering humanity is an action that we are confronted with again and again in the gospels.

Nothing less than a personal touch with the person in need will satisfy Jesus. We do have one or two cases on record that show Christ's power to heal at a distance, but in the great majority of cases Jesus healed with a personal touch.

Do we have a personal touch? This is what we are called to have.

A wealthy Western woman visited Mother Teresa in Calcutta and offered to write a check to support the work of the Sisters of Charity. But Mother Teresa declined: "I won't take your money."

The woman insisted, reminding Mother Teresa that she had great resources to donate. But Mother Teresa still said, "No money." Exasperated, the woman stammered, "Well, what can I do?" Mother Teresa said, "Come and see."

She led the woman by the hand down into a dreadful shelter. . . . . found a desperately dirty, hungry child, and asked the woman to take care of him. The woman took a cloth and a water basin and bathed the child. Then she spooned cereal into the child's mouth.

That woman reported later that her life was changed! She became part of something that money could not buy or fix or replace. She took care of the child on a human, personal and tangible level.

Have we become part of something that money cannot buy, fix or replace? Sometimes our hands must become dirty in order to represent Christ to the world! . . . . . in order to see our fellow human beings through the eyes of Christ!

In his book: *Caring, Feeling, Touching*, Sidney Simon, a teacher at the University of Massachusetts, speaks of a "skin hunger" that is felt by all of us.

It is a deep-seated need for the touch, the feel, the concrete reality of human contact. He points out that every human being comes into this world needing to be touched. . . . . and this is a need that continues until death.

As we think about this leper in Mark 1, I wonder. How long had it been since someone had shaken his hand, patted him on the back, put an arm around his waist, hugged him, touched his cheek, wiped a tear from his eye, or kissed him? The truth is, all those things were merely a memory as he lived in the leper colony in his cave.

But one day he heard that Jesus was in town. Jesus, the one claiming to be the Son of God. The one who heals the sick, makes the lame walk, and opens the eyes of the blind. And so, the leper comes to him, and we see the nature of Christ – we see this repulsive, diseased, horrible looking outcast through the eyes of Jesus.

And we see Christ's call to us.

Father Damien, a Roman Catholic priest from Belgium, gave himself unselfishly to serve those with leprosy. He was doing regular work in a parish in the mid 1800's, when he heard about the Hawaiian island of Molokai with its leprosarium, where incurable lepers were sent. He decided that these people "in darkness" needed a resident priest and volunteered for this service. "I am bent on devoting my life to the lepers," he said.

His down-to-earth Christian humanism led him to attempt the remaking of man's life even in the despair of Molokai, and he worked with the lepers to build houses, schools, and meeting places. At the same time he studied new ways of treating lepers. He also offered a context of celebration; he encouraged festivity to provide hope in the experience of decay and frustration.

One day when he stood to speak to his flock, he began his remarks by addressing them as "We lepers." He had touched them so intimately as he bound their wounds, that he himself contracted the dreaded disease. In one of his last letters he wrote, "My face and my hands are already decomposing, but the good Lord is calling me to keep Easter with Himself."

If we seek to touch the hurting places of the world, we need to be prepared for the fact that there are costs involved. And yet, this is the way the power of Christ continues to get out to a hurting world.

I read somewhere that Mother Teresa once said that if at the end of the day you want to examine your conscience, just look at your hands. What have your hands done today? Whom have they served? Has the imprint of Christ's image been left on anything your hands have touched?

There are so many "lepers" living in our world today. They might not have the same dreaded disease that the man was suffering from in our Gospel Lesson from Mark.....but the situation is somewhat similar.

And these persons are our neighbors, our colleagues, our classmates, our teachers, our friends.

They are crippled by some hurt, some pain, a memory from their past, or a lingering illness...  
...and they too need someone who will reach out and touch them, who will love them, who will see their pain through the eyes of Jesus and have compassion on them.

We are to see humanity through the compassionate eyes of Christ if we are going to be true followers of Christ. We are to touch others with the holy touch of Christ.

Jesus made a speech during the last week of His earthly life about the great judgment at the end of time. The speech is recorded in Matthew Chapter 25. We've talked about it before. Jesus said The sheep will be separated from the goats.

The sheep are the followers of Christ, the goats are not. The sheep are the ones who fed the hungry, gave a drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited those in prison.

Jesus tells us that when we do these things for other people.....we are actually doing them for Jesus! Jesus is in such solidarity with suffering humanity that He and they are literally one!

The real test in Jesus' story about the sheep and the goats is: "What do we really think of Jesus?" Because in loving others, we show just how much or how little we love our Lord! That may sound harsh, but Jesus really doesn't give us any other options.

Through Jesus' teachings and example God has opened up for us an elusive but crucial paradox at the heart of our lives. The ultimate good in life is when we are liberated, let loose to become such lovers of God that we virtually surprise ourselves by loving those whom God loves...  
...but freely, without expecting a payoff.

When we come to see humanity through the eyes of Christ there is a spontaneity about it...  
...a lack of self-consciousness or calculation or a "what's in it for me"

God became flesh and dwelt among us...and He touched us. He lived with us. He had compassion on us...and so He touched us. This is the heart of the love of God for you and for me. He even died so that we don't have to.....and He rose from the dead, and through His Resurrection, we too have the hope of eternal life.

One day, while Jesus was here on earth, "A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,'" he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured."

We all have some sort of leprosy. We all have something about us that makes us 'unclean.' Jesus has compassion on all of us. He is stretching out His hands in order to touch us and make us clean. And once we receive His touch, we are to pass His love, His compassion on to others.

On this earth, at this crucial time in history, Christ yearns to see hurting humanity through the eyes of Christians such as you and me. We are to be the eyes of Christ, and we are to touch the so-called untouchables with Christ's loving, compassionate, and healing hands.

If we really believe what we say, there is no other way to make this dirty world, clean!