

Remember the panic a few years ago over an outbreak of Ebola in Africa? We mobilized troops, set up isolation areas for people who may have been exposed or infected, no one wanted to get on an airplane that may have been to the continent of Africa. Leprosy was the Ebola of biblical times.

Leprosy is a disease that primarily affects the skin and the nerves outside the brain and spinal cord, called the peripheral nerves. It may also strike the eyes and the thin tissue lining the inside of the nose. The main symptom of leprosy is disfiguring skin sores, lumps, or bumps that do not go away after several weeks or months followed by pain and numbness usually in the feet, hands and face.

Leprosy is easily treated today with antibiotics and sanitation. In Our Lord's day, it was a death sentence. The skin lesions would weep body fluids and get infected. Eventually parts of the body would fall off unnoticed because of the nerve damage, the resulting secondary infections would overwhelm the body and the person would die.

Because leprosy is spread in the same manner as the common cold, given the crowded living conditions, common eating and drinking utensils and general lack of sanitation it could devastate a community so the measures to prevent its spread were draconian. They had a relatively sophisticated screening protocol for leprosy and the fungus and molds that they associated with the disease, but once a person was declared unclean, their life changed for the worse.

They were exiled from their families and community; they lost their means of support, as did their family that depended on them. They were marked and they had to cover their mouth whenever they encountered someone who did not have the disease. They lived off charity and either by themselves or in small communities in the unclean spaces, what we would call the town dump. Their lives were absolutely miserable.

Given these conditions it shouldn't shock us that the unnamed leper in today's Gospel approached Jesus looking for a cure. He was under the sentence of a slow, lingering death. If the crowd stoned him for approaching too closely, he would just die sooner than from the disease. Jesus offered hope, and for that hope he was willing to risk everything he had.

Jesus didn't have to touch the leper to cure him. He could have easily accomplished this task from any distance. But instead Jesus reached out in compassion and touched the man. By touching him, he violated the restrictions in the law, made himself ritually unclean, cutting himself off from the community and exposed himself to infection with this act of mercy. In essence he joined himself to the leper in his suffering. Once he was cured, Jesus sent the leper to the priest so he could be declared clean, offer sacrifice in thanksgiving and re-enter the community.

Lets fast forward to today and change the imagery. Instead of leprosy, let us use sin. Sin is the disease of the soul. Sin is contagious. Sin numbs us to sin so that we commit more and greater sins and it doesn't bother us. Sin separates us from our families. It makes us unclean in the sight of God and if some sins become known they separate us from the community. Sin destroys relationships. Even if the relationship is based on sin, it will eventually be destroyed because trust, which is the foundation of all healthy relationships, isn't possible in a relationship that is based on sin.

Just as Jesus sent the leper to the priest to be declared clean and to offer sacrifice in order to be readmitted into the community, he sends us to his Priest so he can reach out and touch us with his compassion in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and remove the disease of sin from our souls. Then we offer sacrifice, penance for our sins and in thanksgiving for the gift we have received as we re-enter the community.

When Jesus cured the leper, do you think that he just cured the leprosy? Think about it, Jesus looks at the leper and says; "In paragraph 3.2.1.a of our contract the only performance objective is the cure of leprosy, the joy of the good news, remission of sins, and fixing your sprained ankle aren't in the contract. If you want these performance objectives included we just have to renegotiate." It sounds absurd because it is. Jesus loves us and is a master craftsman; he isn't going to leave any job half done.

Now we come to the dichotomy between then and now. Jesus admonishes the leper telling him to keep quiet about what has happened to him. He isn't to tell anyone. So the leper goes out and shouts his joy at being cured to anyone who would listen. He couldn't help himself, he was not only cured of the most dread disease of his time, he was filled with the joy of his encounter with Christ and the cleansing that it entailed.

We on the other hand receive our cleansing in Reconciliation and then we come to Mass and in the Word and the Eucharist have a closer encounter with Jesus than the leper. Jesus just touched the leper, he becomes one with us in the reception of the Eucharist. In addition we have received the great commission, "Go out and teach all nations baptizing them in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Our relationship is refreshed every time we reconcile and receive the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. We have been told to shout our joy from the rooftops! But we consider religion, our faith, the source of our joy a subject that should not be discussed in polite company.

Shame on us! We have hidden our light under a basket because we are afraid of what? Being unpopular? Loosing friends? Strange looks? Someone disagreeing with us? At least our lives aren't in danger like our brothers and sisters in so many parts of the world.

Lent starts this week and many of us are already negotiating with ourselves on what we can give up that won't inconvenience us too much. Let me recommend a challenge for you to consider. Instead of just giving things up, add this task. Have a short conversation with someone outside church about your faith once a week during Lent. Isn't it time that we learned to join the leper in shouting our joy for the many wonderful gifts that God has given us?