

The Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time February 14, 2021

Some of the best stories in the gospels are those of Jesus' interactions with ordinary people who have the courage to step out of the crowd and approach Him. Today's gospel is an example of a leper who does just that.

In Jesus' day, lepers were the most miserable of people. Because of their disease, they were abandoned by society. They could not enter towns and could not worship in the temple, as our first reading tells us. People were disgusted by their appearance and would run away whenever they saw one.

Like other lepers, the one in today's gospel was used to being treated with contempt by people. Yet, he came to Jesus and knelt down before Him. He must have thought there was a risk of Jesus turning away in disgust at him and telling him to go away. Still, he didn't let his fear of rejection hold him back. He needed healing and he knew that Jesus was his only hope.

The way he addresses Jesus also tells us a lot about his faith. He says, "If you wish, you can make me clean." By starting off with the words, "if you wish", the leper tells Jesus that he is ready to accept God's will. If God wishes to make him clean, he will accept that. If God wishes that he should go on living with leprosy, he will also accept that as well. Though he clearly prefers to be healed, he lets Jesus know that he places his trust not only in Jesus' power to heal but also in his goodness. Whatever Jesus decides, this leper knows it is for the best.

Like the leper in today's gospel, we come to Jesus with many needs weighing on our hearts - both for ourselves and our loved ones. Many of us may have been praying fervently and God has not seemed to answer. We may begin to wonder whether or not He is even listening. That is when the leper in today's gospel can serve as an example for us. Can we believe that, no matter how God answers, it is for our good? Can we believe that, whether He says "yes" or "no" to our prayers, He still loves us unconditionally and faithfully? Can we have enough trust in Him to make His will a bigger priority in our lives than our own needs and desires?

Then the leper says to Jesus, "you can make me clean." It is interesting that he does not say "you can heal me" or "you can make me well." Instead, he says, "you can make me clean". The word "unclean" was used by a person who, according to the Law of Moses, could not enter the temple and join in the worship of the community. You could become unclean by eating pork or shellfish. You could become unclean by having contact with human blood or with a corpse. For all these situations, the Law of

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Moses provided ways that a person could become clean again and return to the temple. But, for the leper, the only way to be made clean was to be healed.

By saying, “you can make me clean”, it is clear that what the leper wants most of all is to return to the temple and to be part of the worshipping community again. He wants His relationship with God and with God’s people restored. He wants reconciliation and peace of spirit, to know that he can bring his gifts before God and have them accepted. This leper had his priorities straight. He wanted more than anything to be in right relationship with God and with God’s people.

That is one prayer that Jesus will always answer. If we ask Jesus to help us to love Him more, He will say “yes”. If we ask Him to give us more faith and hope, He will grant our request. That is why Jesus came - to bring us closer to God and to each other. The leper in today’s gospel understood that and was made clean because of his faith.

There are many ways that God could help us out. He might give us the job we’ve always wanted. But, if that job means that we will spend less time with our families and will be too stressed out to pray, what good would that be? He might grant us the healing we desire. But if that means that we forget about Him and go on living the way we did before, how would that make us more loving people? If our prayers seem to be going unanswered, it is not because God doesn’t love us and certainly not because God can’t hear us. We have to ask Him instead, “Lord, what do you want me to learn from what I am suffering?” God’s plan is always better than our plan. What God wants for us is always greater than what we want for ourselves. With trust and patience, it will become clear to us if we continue to approach Jesus with the faith of the leper in today’s gospel.

Jesus is not distant from us. He is closer to us than we can see. And He is not indifferent to us. He says to us what He says to the leper - “I do will it.” Jesus wants us to be happy and joyful. He wants us to be at peace and to be secure. He doesn’t take any pleasure from our suffering or difficulties. Rather, He is by our side through it all, carrying us through it. If He has led us to a place of suffering, it is only because it is the only path to the blessings He wants to give us. We will have peace through it all if we make the words of today’s psalm our own - “I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.”

At this Mass, we will have the opportunity to approach Jesus in the Eucharist. It

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is the greatest of all miracles - far greater than any healing He ever performed while He walked the earth. In it, we find the communion with Him and with His People that our hearts yearn for. In this Blessed Sacrament, we are made clean. This is God's will for us - to be perfectly united with Him. The leper was healed because He approached Jesus with trust in His will and faith in His power. We will be made clean and healed if we do the same.