

Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Hearts Enlarged by Christ

This Sunday's first reading from the *Book of Leviticus* gives just a few of the horrible rules established by the Mosaic community to protect itself from leprosy. In the ancient times leprosy was believed to be deforming, incurable and contagious. Leprosy included most skin disorders: Hansen's disease which is leprosy proper, psoriasis, skin cancer, impetigo, boils and even serious acne. Lepers were ostracized by their families and neighbors, and forced to live outside the villages and towns. They were referred to as the Living Dead. Lepers had to wear ragged clothes. They had to let their hair go uncombed and uncut. As today's reading says, they had to cover their mouths with one hand and call out "Unclean, unclean" as they walked. Anyone who came into any contact whatsoever with a leper was considered to be unclean like the leper.

And Jesus, moved with pity, stretched out his hand, touched the leper, and said to him, "Be made clean." Jesus did not see the unclean leper, or his disease. He was not concerned with the strict prohibitions of Jewish society. Jesus did not see a leper at all; he saw a human soul in desperate need.

He stretched out his hand and touched him. He healed him with his touch.

Jesus gave this power to his disciples. At the conclusion of the *Gospel of Mark*, Jesus proclaims the signs of the members of his people. Among these signs is this one: they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.

We possess the wonderful capacity to be instruments of the healing power of Christ. Therefore, we have the duty not only to pray for the sick and to help them get effective medical help, but also to pray over them and extend the touch of Christ to them. In the second reading for today Paul challenges us to imitate Christ. We are to be ministers of healing. We are to touch not just the physically sick, but all those whose lives are hurting and need healing in any way possible.

It is simply not Christian to ostracize anyone for any reason whatsoever. In the Christian society, even those with the most contagious diseases are cared for in a way that gives them dignity and love.

How about those who are spiritually sick? How about those who have left the Church, left Christianity? Are they to be cared for as those who are very sick? Absolutely. Those who have left Christian society are always welcomed back into the society when they seek to return. For example, even in the extremely rare cases of excommunication, such as when someone performs or assists in abortions, that person can always seek forgiveness and re-entry into the community.

And yet, many people throw children or relatives out of their lives. "You are no longer my son, my daughter," a parent hisses. Is there ever a situation where there is no longer any possibility of healing, of mercy, of extending the hand of Christ to those

who seek reconciliation? Not in Christianity. The Forgiving Father may not have been able to give his Prodigal Son the remainder of the farm. That belonged to the Elder Brother. But he was able to welcome the prodigal back into the family. The person who has hurt his or her spouse and children may not be able to resume his or her place in the marriage, but that person still can receive the forgiveness, the healing he or she longs for. The convicted murderer may never be able to re-assume a place in free society, but he can be forgiven and given an opportunity to turn to God while incarcerated.

When we allow ourselves to be so overcome by hurt and hatred that we refuse to extend the healing hand of the Lord to others, we take upon ourselves the sickness of the other person. Hatred kills. When we allow hatred to be part of our lives, we commit spiritual suicide. We cannot allow hatred to destroy us. Even faced with the reality that there are many people in the world who hate us and who want us dead simply because we are Americans, we cannot allow hatred to destroy our humanity. Yes, we have to take measures to protect ourselves from those who would destroy us. Still, we do not have the right to hate anyone or any people and at the same time call ourselves Christian.

The Gospels often note that Jesus was moved with pity for the people as he preached the Kingdom of God. When he faced the troubled, the abandoned, the sick, when stirred by the blind, when crossing paths with the widow of Nain, and today, when face to face with a leper, Jesus was moved not by disgust, not by antagonism, but by compassion. Having compassion and showing mercy are the Christian qualities of great minds and large hearts.

Today we are called to allow our hearts to be enlarged by Christianity.