

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46

Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 11

1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1

Mark 1:40-45

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While everyone else rejected the leper in our Gospel, because of what he *represented*, Jesus healed him, because of who he *was*.

The disfiguring disease that we associate with the word “leprosy,” was virtually unknown in Jesus’ time and place. In those days the label “leprosy” was applied to a range of skin conditions, including relatively minor problems like psoriasis and ringworm.

We often assume that lepers were cast out of society because people were afraid that their disease was contagious. While this *was* a concern, apparently it was not the most important consideration. Lepers were outcasts because of what they *symbolized*. Skin disease was regarded as a physical revolt of the body. Leprosy was understood as bodily *chaos*. Lepers were seen as symbols of the wider disorder that can occur in society, when political, economic and social institutions break down. Especially in a society like Israel, which felt terribly threatened on all sides, and from within, chaos seemed a real danger. So, lepers who represented chaos in their very bodies, were spurned.

It was for *this* reason that they had to grow their hair long, and leave their heads and beards uncovered. They were required to wear torn clothing, and had to live outside the camp, or later, outside the cities. When they entered a city, they had to cry repeatedly, “Unclean. Unclean,” so that other people could hurry away.

What an appalling and degrading way to have to live! A boy, in this traditional society, who had hoped to be a carpenter or a fisherman like his father, developed psoriasis, and was condemned instead to a shadowy existence at the fringe of society. A girl with ringworm could never wear pretty clothes, or dress her hair. As long as her condition lasted, she could never seek a desirable husband. All this for the sake of *symbolism!*

When he sees the leper in our Gospel, Jesus is “moved to pity.” In some manuscripts Jesus is described as feeling, not pity, but *anger*. Commentators tell us that he is angry at Satan -- at the power of disease, sin, and death. I’d like to suggest that, in part, his anger is caused by seeing a *human being* treated like a *thing* -- like a *symbol* of something else. Jesus saw before him, not an animated illustration of the chaos threatening society, but a living *person*, -- a man or woman with parents, and a home town, and with shattered hopes -- a human individual created and loved by his heavenly Father.

We all want to be treated as individuals. That’s why we’re pleased when someone important remembers our name. It’s why hucksters since time immemorial have said. “You know buddy, I like you, so I’m going to make you a special deal.” I’ve long thought that about the worst thing in the world would be to stand before a judge, and hear a solemn voice declare, “I’m going to make an example of you.” I’d want to shout, “I’m not an example! I’m a person!”

Jesus doesn’t make an example of anyone, unless it’s an example of God’s abounding love, not just for the human race in general, but for each and every human individual. He would have lived and died for any one of us, if we were the only person in the world. Yet we, despite our best efforts to imitate Christ, are continually tempted see certain people not

as individuals, but as representatives of something else -- something we fear. They come to symbolize our anxieties.

Jesus' action had consequences for him. Ironically, while the man he cured was accepted back into society, it now became impossible for *Jesus* to come into town. Like a leper, Jesus had to stay in desert places, because now *he* had become a symbol -- a symbol of the peoples' false messianic expectations. If people had been able to put aside their assumptions about what Jesus symbolized, if they had been able to see him for who he is, the wonder of his reality would have cast all their expectations into the shade. And, of course, the same is true when we encounter one another.