

## SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR B)

February 14, 2021

Leviticus 13:1–2, 44–46 • 1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1 • Mark 1:40–45

### I.

On Monday, I met up with a friend.

We decided to take a long walk from Carytown to Rocketts Landing and back: a 9-mile round trip.

It was a good way for us to reconnect and catch up.

The distance involved and the time spent—4 hours—allowed the conversation to flow.

Opportunities like that have become even more important during the pandemic, as social distancing has brought about greater isolation.

### II.

Our experience over the past year can help us understand the predicament of the leper in today's Gospel.

The First Reading, drawn from the Book of Leviticus, indicates that, for Israelites and Jews, leprosy brought about the social isolation of the infected person:

“As long as the sore is on him  
he shall declare himself unclean,  
since he is in fact unclean.  
He shall dwell apart,  
making his abode outside the camp.”

At this point, some historical background may be helpful.

First, the term “leprosy” refers to a series of scaly or fungal infections, but probably not to Hansen's disease, which is what we think of as leprosy.

Second, the status of ritual impurity—  
being “unclean”—  
reflects an underlying concern about health,  
and, ultimately, a fear of death associated with those conditions.

Third, the forced quarantine of the infected person  
was meant to allow time for the person to heal  
and, in the meantime, to protect the rest of the community.

These concerns are understandable, and prudent,  
but they were also, of course, a hardship for the infected person.

Therefore, Jesus’ healing of the leper in the Gospel not only cures him  
but also restores him to his community.

This encounter between Christ and the leper is a great help to us at this time.

One difference is that, because of the pandemic,  
it’s not just a few people who are isolated from the community.

Rather,  
all members of the community must observe a certain distance from all others.

The attitude of the leper is a remarkable witness to faith:

“A leper came to Jesus  
and kneeling down begged him and said,  
‘If you wish,  
you can make me clean.’”

The leper’s posture—kneeling—recognizes Jesus’ authority and power.

The leper’s conditional statement—“If you wish...”—  
expresses belief in Jesus power,  
but not entitlement.

We get the sense that even if he weren’t healed,  
the leper would still believe in Jesus.

The leper’s attitude is one of conviction, not of presumption.

The leper's kneeling posture suggests that he is completely open to God's will, whatever it might be.

And the leper's conviction is also an attitude and a decision—  
not a feeling.

He chooses to think and act in the way he does.

For these reasons, in the course of the encounter,  
the leper catches a glimpse of Christ's identity.

Typical of the Gospel of Mark,  
Jesus wishes to keep his identity secret until the passion,  
because it's only through that event that he can be fully understood.

That is our belief as the Christian community, the Church:

We believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God,  
and that he has saved us by his passion, death, and resurrection.

And that event of our salvation—the paschal mystery—  
is made present in the celebration of the sacraments,  
above all in the sacrifice of the Mass.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God—and nothing else—  
is the basis of our community and our common life.

It's not based on the affection we may have for one another,  
nor is it based on the pope, bishop, priest, deacon, or any other person.

It doesn't mean that we'll like everyone or everything about the community.

But it means that we can strive to love God  
and one another because Jesus Christ is our foundation.

And even though we have to be distanced because of the pandemic,  
Christ is the one who constantly pulls us together.

“If you wish, you can make me clean...  
Be made clean.”

Christ forgives our sins, he heals our weaknesses,  
and he restores us to our place in the Christian community.

### III.

On Thursday, I was buoyed by an experience of community.

Each month, I give a catechesis or instruction,  
which is based on a monthly theme

This month, the parish is focusing on the Corporal Works of Mercy.

Thirty-two parishioners of different ages and backgrounds came together.

I'm especially gratified that the middle-school parishioners joined in,  
because it's a regular part of their catechesis or religious education.

That experience got me thinking about the meaning of the word "corporal."

It means "bodily,"  
from the Latin *corpus*, meaning "body."

The Corporal Works of Mercy care for the bodily needs of others.

These works of mercy are also corporal in another sense:  
they are the actions of the whole Body of Christ that is the parish,  
the Christian community.

Amid the pandemic and isolation,  
the Christian community still gathers:  
to learn about the faith,  
to celebrate the sacraments,  
and to serve the poor, who are also isolated.

Jesus Christ heals and restores.

He is the foundation of our common life as Christians.