

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

February 11, 2024

Our three readings of today contain the Christian teaching on the need for social acceptance especially when people are different from us. They also tell us that it is purity or holiness of soul coming from God that cleanses our lives.

In the First Reading from the Book of Leviticus we heard of society's treatment towards those who suffered temporary skin disorders. And the chief concern in this legislation was to protect the community.

Our Second Reading from the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians is summarized by saying that charity is the first spiritual Law by which Christians must live. Charity must therefore govern the behavior of each and every Christian.

The Gospel also narrates the miracle of Jesus' healing of a leper. Leprosy was a dreaded disease during the time of Jesus as it was in the Old Testament.

As you might have observed, the Old Testament can be rough sometimes. As you know, it's filled with all sorts of stories that can boggle the modern mind, stories containing fantastic other-worldly elements, stories containing God's voice from the heavens, stories containing violence and betrayal and cruelty, all sorts of stuff that can be difficult to listen to, and difficult to understand. And laws, of course, lots and lots of laws.

We see one of those laws and its consequences on full display in our First Reading from Leviticus. God tells Moses and Aaron what to do if someone appears to have leprosy. Try to heal them? Nope. Offer them compassion and understanding and kindness? Nope. Try to make their lives as happy and pleasant and possible? Uh-uh. No, they are to be somewhat banished from the community, forced to live apart (unless they somehow are miraculously cured).

Of course, it makes some sense given that they knew absolutely nothing about diseases or their causes or their cures. All they knew was that certain skin diseases were really bad and could be spread to others in the community. And they couldn't take that chance. On top of that, anything bad that befell a person was seen as a kind of direct act of God, a punishment of some sorts for something the person did (or someone close to that person did). And so, there was often a kind of spiritual element attached to disease, a kind of perceived divine retribution that they simply did not want to have to deal with. It was better to just keep the person at a distance. They were afraid and, well, fear can get people to do all sorts of things.

Jesus often contradicted that kind of thinking, he tried to get people to realize that the bad things that happened to people were often not their fault, were not because of personal sin. And while he was busy pushing back against that old way of thinking, he simply healed those who needed healing, whether that be physical or emotional or spiritual. Yet, people had difficulty accepting what he was saying. And you know what? That type of feeling is still prevalent today. Especially in my country Ghana, almost every major disease or sickness or misfortune is attributed to some evil person in the family. Mostly among the illiterates and semi-illiterates. How many of us look at our hardships or illnesses or tragedies and wonder what we did wrong, wonder what we are being punished for? And conversely, how many of us see other people who seem to have easier lives than we have and wonder what they did to get on God's good side?

I wonder if the members of the Jewish community felt bad when they sent lepers away. Did they do so begrudgingly, heavy-heartedly, sadly or fearfully? Or did some of them see their rejection of certain people who seemed to have fallen out of God's favor as a reflection of God's rejection of those same people, see their punishments and consequences as being consistent with what God wanted, with what God was "thinking", with what God considered fair. In other words, if sin made God mad, made

God want to reject and punish someone, should they not do the same when they encountered sin? Isn't that how sin works?

It would have been nearly impossible for the Jewish people in the time of Moses to see things differently. That was simply how the world worked. God made rules or motivated the people to make rules. And when those rules were violated, when people sinned, God punished them and would distance himself and leave the person or the people on their own, outside of divine protection. And in many respects, the community did the same. The ancient world certainly could be a tough place.

I wonder if we still see sin that same way. Do we believe that when we sin God sort of pushes us to the margins, keeps us at a distance, denies us blessings? Do we believe that when we sin God denies us his love, his care, his kindness? Do we believe that when we sin God "banishes" us to a place where we are essentially on our own, a place in which we will remain until WE turn our lives around all by OURSELVES, with no help from him? Put another way, are the consequences of sin the things God does TO US as a kind of divine retribution?

You can probably tell that I'm going to push back against that sort of thinking. Now, I'm not saying there aren't consequences for sin. Indeed there are. And I'm not saying that sinning won't bring pain upon us, or disappointment upon us, or hardship upon us. Yet, those things don't come about principally through God's action, they are not the product of a God who wants to "get back at us" for whatever it is we have done. No, I think it's more correct to say that, when we sin, God doesn't choose to banish us, nor kick us out, or drive us away from his love and mercy and compassion. Rather, when we sin WE are doing those very things to ourselves. We are placing ourselves at a distance. We are wandering off to a place where we will feel all alone, and cut off, and rejected. Whatever "banishment" is taking place is because of our choices, not God's.

My dear friends, God wants us back into his loving arms. He wants us to experience the security of his compassion and the fire of his love. And he

wants to forgive us seventy times seven times. He wants us back in the fold, not alone and afraid and at risk and seemingly forgotten. And he can do what the people in the time of Moses absolutely couldn't do - make us clean, heal us, forgive us, save us. Imagine that.

So, let's be grateful for a God who will never stop loving us, never stop giving us chance after chance after chance; our God who will never keep us at a distance, never force us to go it alone, never fail to dry our tears.

Let's just be sure we're not doing those things to ourselves and to those around us.