

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time – Feb. 15, 2015  
St. Mary's Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael Renninger

The message on my voice mail caught me off guard at first.

It was the director of chaplains at the local hospital. This was the mid 1980's. I had just become a member of a monastery outside of Philadelphia (home of the Super Bowl Champion Eagles...). As part of my ministry training, I took holy communion to the patients at a local hospital.

The director of chaplains left a message on my voice mail: "We're holding a meeting Saturday at 11:00. All volunteer chaplains must attend."

There was no further explanation. So when I arrived on Saturday, everyone in the room was asking – "Do *you* know what this is about?"

Finally, the meeting started. The head chaplain explained that a new disease was impacting more and more people in our area. And this disease was raising new questions about hospital procedures.

The new disease was AIDS... a strange disease, which was primarily impacting gay men in the Philadelphia region. For a while, no one knew what caused it. No one knew how it was spread. Fear was everywhere.

The head chaplain said that several volunteer chaplains had raised a question about the patients in that hospital who had HIV. And the question was simple – "Did chaplains have a moral obligation to visit those patients? After all, at that stage, we did not know if you could get the disease by something as simple as touching the infected person."

Basically, the question was this: must we visit those folks if it will make us sick, or make our family sick?

Immediately, several people in the room observed that the Gospel requires us to be present to those who are most vulnerable.

Then one person stood up and said: "Look, the other day I had to go into a room to visit one of those AIDS people. The fellow in that room was sick. And his sickness comes from his perversion. And many of us don't want to touch him, because we don't want to get sick too."

I was shocked. I had never heard a 'Christian chaplain' speak that way about another human being.

Disease is a terrible thing. Illness invades our bodies and takes control. But maybe there is one thing worse than simply being sick – and that is when our sickness makes us feel

isolated. It is awful when our illness makes us untouchable.

Now, it is certainly understandable when schools and hospitals tell us, “If you’re sick, stay home. Don’t bring your germs in here.

But then there are times when illness makes us feel completely untouchable:

- the cancer patient, who feels like the lost weight and lost hair cause folks to keep their distance
- when someone living with HIV feels senses that even loved ones are afraid to touch them.
- someone struggles with mental illness, and it seems like everyone stays at arm’s length.

In many ways, there is nothing more healing than human touch. And there is nothing worse than to feel untouchable, unlovable, cut off ... told by the chaplain, “your sickness is your fault, and I’m not touching you!”

Today in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus meets a man living with leprosy. In the Bible, that word – ‘leprosy’ - is used to describe a whole collection of skin diseases. The causes were uncertain at the time. But everyone knew that leprosy was deadly and dangerous.

In Leviticus, lepers were instructed to live at the edge of town, cut off from family and human contact. If they did have to go into town, they were told to walk around shouting “Unclean,” so that ‘healthy’ people could avoid them. They were literally untouchable.

Such a man seeks healing from Jesus. Now, Jesus *could* have healed him with a word and wave of his hand, staying a safe distance away. But instead, Jesus reaches out to the man and - in direct violation of religious law – he *touches* this untouchable, and breaks down every barrier.

There *was* a physical healing that day. But there was also Jesus’ healing touch which let this man know that he was NOT untouchable. Jesus’ touch assured this man that he was NOT unworthy. The man’s inner sense of desperation and loneliness was conquered by the warm touch of Jesus’ skin. Jesus cured more than a skin disease that day.

Thank God, Jesus *still* wants to touch people with that same kind of love and power. There is, I think, a bit of the leper in many of us – not because we have a sickness of the skin, but because we have a sickness of soul.

Sometimes, people make us feel that we are not good enough; that we are unworthy of dignity; that there are parts of us that are untouchable – beyond the healing power of Christ’s love.

Sometimes, we are the ones who convince ourselves that there are pieces of our

personality, parts of our past, aspects of our present reality, which put us beyond the scope of God's love. For many of us, there are aspects of our lives that feel unclean. What is it in your life that makes you feel that way?

Once you've named that, focus on what the leper did in today's Gospel. He had faith enough to kneel before Jesus, and to ask for a cure. Jesus WANTS to touch and heal us. He WANTS to let you know that every part of you is loved by God. He will touch you with his love, if you let him.

He will touch your ears with his healing word. He will touch your hands with his loving sacraments. He will embrace you with the arms of your brothers and sisters in the church. He will touch your soul in quiet moments of prayer. No one is untouchable. Jesus makes that very clear.

We must make that very clear too, in the way that we reach out to others. Christians need to be honest about the fact that some of our neighbors feel isolated, untouchable, cast aside.

Sometimes, they feel untouchable because they are immigrants without a home, workers without a job, struggling folks without hope.

They feel cut off, because they cannot afford to dress like everyone else, or they are not as educated as the people up the street, or because their life just doesn't 'fit in' with everyone else's.

Do you know someone who seems to be on the fringe? Do you know someone who feels lonely or beyond hope?

The Lord wants to use your hands to touch others with hope-filled love.

(As we baptize these children today, it is the Lord himself who embraces them. As the water touches their skin, Christ's love will touch their hearts. In Baptism, Jesus assures these child, and us, that he will never withdraw his loving touch from our lives).

We all need the warm touch of God's love. That touch is as close as the person sitting next to you, and the sacrament which will touch your hands and lips in just a few minutes. Pay attention to that touch today. There is a healing gift in His touch!