

2018 – Year B – 6th Sunday

They are not our kind of people. I don't want you to be friends with them. They are not like us, you can tell that they don't look and talk like us. They don't have the same set of values as us. They can never really be Americans and they can't be trusted. They have strange rituals that they perform in secret and customs that are against the values that we stand for. Stay away from those people at all costs.

These hate filled words might seem familiar because of the times we are living through. You might even believe you have an idea as to which group of people these words might be directed, but I can almost guarantee that you would be wrong.

The attitudes behind these words, and the actions they led to, were directed at all Catholics coming to the America. We talk very proudly about people coming to the New World to achieve religious liberty, but that excluded Catholics. When the United States were formed and our Constitution written one of the amendments guarantees freedom of religion from government interference, but the reality was very different.

In New York, in 1700, priests were declared as disturbers of the public order and an enemy of the true Christian religion. If a priest were found they faced life imprisonment. If imprisoned and escaped, they faced death if recaptured. George Washington, in 1775, had to forbid his troops from burning an effigy of the Pope. In 1831 the New York Protestant Association was formed to produce anti-Catholic propaganda that Popery, to be hated, needs but to be seen in its true character. In 1835 the Native American Democratic Association stated "American

independence is in danger of being annihilated by the machinations of the Pope, the Jesuits, and the Romanish priesthood, and that all Catholics are in conspiracy to subvert the government.”

Being different sometimes leads to being considered, and treated as, an outsider.

In biblical times any disease that resulted in marks on the skin was considered to be leprosy. If someone was identified as a leper they would be excluded from the community. They would be cut off from their family and forced to live among others who were also considered to be lepers. They had no access to their worshipping community and were not able to work for a living. Lepers were supposed to warn people to stay away from them lest they also contract leprosy. They were consigned to a lonely existence and a slow, painful, death.

Today true leprosy is called Hansen’s disease. It is a bacterial disease that can be spread through droplets of moisture. Hansen’s disease causes skin sores that can be disturbing to look at. It is an infectious disease, but it can be treated and it is not an automatic death sentence.

Our Gospel today has a leper approach Jesus. Instead of warning Jesus away the leper asks for healing. He states his faith in Jesus when he says “...if you wish, you can” when he asks for healing. Mark tells us Jesus “looked with pity” on the plight of the leper. Jesus knew the regulations about lepers but choose to heal rather than obey. We do not know how far the leprosy had spread so we do not know how it had affected the man’s appearance. No matter how the man appeared Jesus reached out and touched the man, and he was healed.

When we hear the word “pity” we could think in terms of looking down on the condition of the leper, but we would be wrong. When Jesus looked on the man he did so with compassion and love. Jesus did not heal all illness in the world, but when someone approached him in faith they were not turned away. Rather Jesus does what others are unable to do, he brings healing and wholeness to a persons’ life. The leper is healed and is able to return to his community and tell everybody that Jesus healed him, even though Jesus asked that it remain secret.

We say that Jesus came to reconcile all people with God through the forgiveness of our sins. In a special way Jesus reached out to those “poor” who are left on the margins of society: the lepers, the lame, the blind, the possessed and the sinners. Jesus wants everyone to understand that they are still close to the God who loves them unconditionally and wants to show them compassion, forgiveness and healing.

We live in a world that seems to thrive by pointing out the differences between people and using it as an excuse to exclude them from full participation in the community. Labels are given to people so then can be treated as other than us: immigrants, Dreamers, Muslims, illegals, Jews, LGBT and others names.

We are called to reach out in compassion to all, just as Jesus did. You might say that it was easy for Jesus because he is the Son of God, but that is not an answer. It wasn’t easy for Fr. Damien to live and treat lepers in Hawaii; it wasn’t easy for St. Teresa of Calcutta to tend to the health needs of the outcasts of Calcutta; it wasn’t easy for Princess Diana to give a victim of aids an embrace; and it wasn’t easy for Pope Francis to kiss a man with a deformity, but it was the right thing. We want to be treated with compassion by God, can we go and do the same?