

FEBRUARY 15, 2015: SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46 I Corinthians 10:31-11:1 Mark 1:40-45

Jesus' gospel miracles are always significant. But it's important to understand that our four evangelists employ them not so much to tell us what Jesus did as to show us who Jesus is. Today's gospel cure of a leper provides us with a prime example of how our sacred authors use specific miracles.

We need only glance at our Leviticus pericope to discover how devastating leprosy was in the biblical world. "The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard he shall cry out, 'Unclean, Unclean!' As long as the sore is on him . . . he shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp." The heart-wrenching scenes of the Jerusalem leper encampment in the classic movie *Ben Hur* are probably quite accurate. A hell on earth. Lepers were the outcasts of the ancient world.

The consequences of leprosy were so dire that only the local priest could determine whether someone was infected or not. Whisper campaigns or anonymous accusations weren't to be accepted. That's why, even after the gospel Jesus cures someone of the disease, he still must send the person to the priests to receive a clean bill of health.

Though no one knew anything about germs until the end of the 19th century, the biblical belief was that leprosy demons not only possessed these unfortunate individuals, but that a simple touch could trigger them to leap from a leper to a non-leper. That makes Mark's mention that, even before Jesus cured this particular leper, "He stretched out his hand and touched him," very significant.

Two Sundays ago I mentioned that Jesus' first Marcan miracle – the exorcism of a demoniac – set the theme for the entire gospel: Jesus and his followers are consumed with a passion to eradicate evil from this world. Today's gospel miracle presents us with an essential step in following through on that mission: bringing those who are outside the community into the community.

Already as little kids we knew some people were "in" and others were "out." We could associate with certain individuals and were expected to avoid others. When we asked, "Why?" the answers varied. It could have been because of their social status, their moral reputation, or even just the color of their skin. There always was a reason.

It's an understatement to say that Jesus of Nazareth's contemporaries had a huge problem with his conviction that everyone was in. How can anyone live in such a world? It goes against our human nature.

Yet it's clear from today's I Corinthians passage that Jesus' first followers actually tried to create such a world. Paul encourages his readers to relate well with everyone. "Avoid giving offense," he writes, "whether to the Jews or Greeks or the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in every way, not seeking my own benefit but that of the many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." If Jesus could do it, why can't we?

One last point. Most Scripture scholars believe Mark didn't originally write that Jesus was "moved with pity" before he cured the leper. The gospel's oldest and best manuscripts describe Jesus at that point as being moved with "anger," not pity. Why? Simply because of his passion to bring everyone in, to eradicate outcasts.

More than any other evangelist, Mark mentions Jesus' anger. When this Galilean carpenter experiences something which goes against his convictions about God's plan for God's people, his emotions flare. Why then do we so calmly and dispassionately tolerate injustice today? We've obviously discovered it's easier than imitating Jesus' devotion to inclusiveness and enduring the consequences which flow from it.

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FEBRUARY 22, 2015: FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 9:8-15 I Peter 3:18-22 Mark 1:12-15

Both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures revolve around covenants. They're at the heart of our relationships with God and one another. At times we even refer to those two biblical collections as the "Old Testament" and the "New Testament," the "Old Covenant" and the "New Covenant."

Basically a covenant is a contract between at least two people; an agreement which not only provides the parties with certain benefits, but also sets out specific responsibilities. We can easily surface both these elements in the covenant we most frequently enter today: marriage.

As I often reminded my marriage course students, there's only one reason to enter into such an agreement: because it makes our life a more fulfilling experience. Our sacred authors were convinced that was also true of the various biblical covenants they narrated. People's lives were always changed and made more interesting and fulfilling whenever they covenanted with Yahweh or the risen Jesus.

Today's Genesis reading provides us with the first of Yahweh's biblical covenants: a post-flood contract with all human beings. "I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood . . ." Except for prohibiting people from eating meat with its "life blood" still in it, there are no responsibilities for humans to carry out. Yahweh's the principal party in this agreement. And just as a wedding ring is an outward sign that someone accepts the responsibilities of a marriage covenant, so the rainbow becomes a sign that Yahweh is committed to carrying out his/her responsibilities to every living creature on earth.

Other covenants will follow, especially the agreement between Abraham and Yahweh in Genesis 15, and the covenant between Yahweh and all the Israelites which took place on Mt. Sinai immediately after the Exodus.

Though we presume Jesus, as a good Jew, was committed to carrying out all the responsibilities which these covenants contained, we also presume that through his lifetime he had signed on to another covenant with Yahweh to which he was committed: an agreement to surface God working effectively in his daily life.

This seems to be what he means when he proclaims, "The kingdom of God is at hand!" in today's gospel pericope. He's convinced we don't have to read another line of Scripture, say another Rosary, or participate in another Eucharist in order to experience God's effective presence in everything we do and everyone we encounter. God's already there.

We have just one responsibility: to "repent." We're not going to experience God in these ways, people and places unless we first change our value system to mirror Jesus' value system. That's the meaning of repentance. What he thought important, we must think important; what he put on the periphery of his life, we must put on the periphery of our lives. There's no other way to experience God's presence.

The remainder of the gospel simply demonstrates Jesus' value system; outlines how we're to repent. In Jesus' covenant with God, people are more important than rules and regulations; one's wealth and talents are to be used to help others, not ourselves. And he became so one with all those around him that he eventually made their sins his sins. During the Last Supper narrative in I Corinthians 11, he demands his followers agree to that same covenant by drinking from the Eucharistic cup; its outward sign.

Today's I Peter passage refers to another sign of our acceptance of this new agreement: baptism. But the normal way we renew that covenant is by receiving from the cup at every Eucharist. Contrary to what I once learned, it's not for "extra credit." It's one of the essentials of a covenant faith.

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