

FEBRUARY 11TH, 2018: SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46 I Corinthians 10:31-11:1 Mark 1:40-45

Paul's words to the Corinthians should ring throughout today's liturgy: ". . . I try to please everyone in every way, not seeking my own benefit but that of the many . . ." As other Christs, our actions are geared to helping others, not doing things for our own advantage. Pope Francis says it well: "We should be building bridges, not walls."

We live in a world in which we're convinced walls help us personally much better than bridges. That's especially true when it comes to those we fear. And as we hear in our Leviticus reading, no one in the ancient world was feared more than a leper.

Leprosy back then was defined as any destructive skin condition. Though people knew nothing of germs, they were convinced a demon of leprosy had taken control of the afflicted person, a demon which could jump from person to person if someone was foolish enough to get close to the leper. One's life was altered forever if he or she was declared a leper. (Though the 50s movie *Ben Hur* wasn't historical, most historians believe the Jerusalem village of lepers it depicted was fairly accurate--a hell on earth.) That's why only a priest could officially proclaim someone leprosy. No "anonymous" accusations. Consequences were devastating.

Mark composed today's pericope against this background. Read it carefully. Not only does Jesus cure the leper and send him to the priests for verification, he breaks the Levitical regulations and actually "touches" him before he heals him.

Two other things about the passage. First, we're still in chapter 1 of Mark. The evangelist continues to tell his readers what evils Jesus' followers should be eradicating. Obviously the "outcasts" around us are one of those evils. In Jesus' faith, no one was out; everyone was in. He expects his followers to constantly reach out, not cut off.

Second, the phrase "moved with pity" replaced the evangelist's original phrase "moved with *anger*." Textual critics tell us not only that the latter wording is found in the best Marcan manuscripts but that it's easier to see how a scribe would change anger to pity than pity to anger. After all, we're dealing with Jesus of Nazareth. The question is, "Why's Jesus angry?"

He doesn't seem to be angry with the leper; rather, according to most scholars, he's uptight with a frame of mind which created an environment in which such people are officially walled off from everyone else. For me to succeed, some individuals must be permanently out of my life.

According to our sacred authors, both the historical and risen Jesus envision a different world, a place in which we demonstrate our belief in God being one with us by becoming one with all those around us, especially those whom society has barred from being part of "our world."

As we know from Matthew 23, Jesus' early followers pictured the church as the place where such unity should begin; a place where there's no honorary titles to divide us or social status to separate us. But then . . . somebody created clergy and laity. We've never been the same since.

Don't let anyone tell you not to be angry over what we've created of Jesus' church. According to Mark, Jesus was frequently angry when he shared his vision with his followers. (Check the other five or six places in his gospel where he depicts an angry Jesus.) Some things are worth getting emotional about.

Walls only come down when we actually tear them down. They normally don't fall down on their own. No wonder Mark places such a disturbing action at the beginning of his gospel. That's where Jesus believes it belongs – at the start of his good news.

FEBRUARY 18TH, 2018: FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

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

Though today's Genesis passage mentions the Bible's first covenant, I'm afraid some of us Catholics don't know the first thing about Scriptural covenants. We've heard the word and know it has something to do with "things" between us and God, but that's about as far as we go.

Covenants are at the heart of both biblical theology and our liturgical practices. The reason, for instance, we take from the cup during the Eucharist revolves around a covenant Jesus presumes we've made with him. A covenant was also why the early church originally didn't permit non-Jews to become Christians.

A covenant is basically an agreement, usually between two or more parties. (Although today's covenant with Noah and his family is made solely by Yahweh.) It's similar to contracts people enter into with one another. Each covenant has two main elements: the parties enter into it freely, and each accepts the responsibilities the agreement demands. Every semester, for instance, I sign a contract with the community college at which I teach. I agree to the terms the college sets forth for its employees – spend X number of hours in the classroom, regularly evaluate my students, and present my subject in a scholarly way. On the college's part, it agrees to pay me the ultra-low wages adjunct professors earn at many such institutions.

The most frequently entered into covenant in our culture is marriage.

Knowing these basics about covenants, it's significant the original Israelites go against the practices of their pagan neighbors and conceive of their unique relationship with Yahweh as a covenant agreement. God has responsibilities; they have responsibilities. They have certain things they can expect from Yahweh; Yahweh has certain things he/she can expect from them. Neither can treat the other at whim.

In the case of Noah and his family, Yahweh is bound by his responsibility never again to send "a flood to destroy all mortal beings." And as most covenants have an outward sign to show the parties have entered into the agreement – a wedding ring in the case of marriage – Yahweh makes the rainbow the outward sign the earth won't again have to worry about such a disaster.

There are various Yahweh/Israelite covenants throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Abraham makes an initial one in Genesis 15, and later, Moses, in the name of all Israelites, enters into the most famous of all biblical covenants on Mt. Sinai.

The unknown author of I Peter understands that Jesus has modified those standard Jewish covenants to include dying and rising with him. If we fulfill our responsibility to die for others in the ways he died for others, he's "obligated" to give us a share in the same life he achieved.

Mark's Jesus, on the other hand, doesn't seem too interested in that new life taking place only after our physical deaths. He's concerned with the unique life Jesus offers us here and now. Scholars are convinced the "kingdom of God" Jesus wants his followers to join him in experiencing revolves around God being present and working effectively in our everyday lives. But in order to reach that point, we must also join him in "repenting:" in doing a 180-degree switch in our value system.

Most of us don't realize we have a covenant responsibility to constantly change the way we look at people and situations around us. Such a readjustment of our values isn't something we do for "extra credit;" it's at the heart of our faith. Each of us agreed to that responsibility either at our baptism or when we first made a free choice of accepting the faith of Jesus.

One of these days we'll explore the outward sign of Jesus' covenant – receiving from the Eucharistic cup. Until then

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