

February 15, 2009

6th Sunday Ordinary Time - Cycle B

Fr. Larry Richards

Good morning. Today when we listen to the Readings, I don't know if you really get a sense that you should from the First Reading, what it was like to be a person with leprosy. To be a person with leprosy was to be a person who was to be cast out. To be a person who was totally rejected by the community. To be a person who did nothing wrong in themselves, all they did was catch leprosy. And they were cast out and they had to live outside the community. And not only that, when they had to go through the community for whatever reason or if someone had approached them they had to cry out unclean. So could you imagine the loneliness, the pain, the isolation that these people felt that their family couldn't come near them, nobody would come near them. When someone would see them, and they had done nothing, they would run. They would scream. They would be completely lost because they would not want to catch leprosy. Can you just get into a moment about what that would feel like? Just for a moment because all of us in one way or another have experienced times of leprosy in our own lives. We have had these pains in our lives. Isolation, loneliness, whatever it happens to be.

But each of us at one time in our lives, maybe some of you at this very moment are experiencing some type of leprosy. And see sometimes when the world sits there and pushes us away... you know whatever it happens to be, I was watching one of the, on HBO about... there was that one minister who went and fell, you know, and the community, the great Christian community sometimes we are, what did they do? Founded the thing and they pushed him out and wouldn't talk to him, wouldn't let him be a part of the thing for over a year. Person has two kids, nobody helped him because he had sinned or whatever and pushed him out. I was watching or listening on my way down to Florida a couple of months ago, and when I was there I was listening to this black preacher and he started a community and he had this big thing and of course he preached once that he didn't believe anybody went to hell. You know because he was watching TV one day and as he was watching he saw this woman in one part of the world and she was holding her dying or dead baby. The baby died of malnutrition. And of course, his theology, the fundamentalist theology showed, well of course, that baby and child, of course, went to hell because they weren't Christians.

And he looked up at God and he says, "God, if you are a god of love, how could you send someone to hell that just lost their baby and everything else because they didn't believe that?" So when he preached that once he was expelled from the community, labeled a heretic, and nobody would talk to him. He lost all of his money. He lost everything and he goes around now talking to Unitarians because they are the only ones who would accept him. And I thought, isn't that good? Only the Unitarians would accept this big Christian preacher. Now most of those people are Christians. They weren't part of the Catholic Church but we do the same thing. You know as soon as someone does an experience or think the way we do we expel them. I have been guilty of that in my own life. Can you imagine? But the reality is that God calls us to be like him and that is an altogether different way than the early community of the Jews. They were commanded to expel these people to keep them away from them.

Well now here is Jesus Christ and when the leper comes to Jesus, notice what happens here. The leper approaches Jesus. He came to Jesus. So first of all Jesus somehow had to be someone who was approachable in one way or another. He was approachable. He knew that Jesus would not run from him like everybody else would run from him. So he came and it says very clearly in the Gospel, "He came to Jesus." And what did he do when he came to Jesus? "He knelt before Him. He came to Jesus," it says, "and he knelt before Him." Which means he made an act of humility. And so too in our own lives when we are these lepers, we need, we are going to look at both aspects of this. But when we feel the leprosy, when we feel the isolation, when we feel the pain whether it is caused by ourselves, caused by somebody else, whatever it is, we need to approach Jesus. Jesus is always approachable. No matter what anybody else says to you, no matter what anybody else cries out to you, no matter how anybody else judges you, Jesus Christ is always approachable.

And when you and I come before Jesus though, we need to make this act of humility. We need to fall on our knees as this leper did. He fell on his knees in the presence of Jesus Christ. Now already when you are doing that, you are acknowledging that this person in front of you can do something for you. And then he doesn't make a request, does he? Does he make a request today in the Gospel? Say no father. He sat there after he sat he went before Him, he knelt down and he didn't make a request, he made a statement of what? Faith. "If You will so You can heal me." That is what he said. So he comes before Jesus. He kneels before Jesus. And then he declares an act of reality, and act of statement of faith. "You can do it. I believe in You."

This past weekend I was down in Raleigh. And as I was in Raleigh there were over 2,000 people I think, all the Catholics in North Carolina were there. And as we were down there in Raleigh, you know I got in one... I gave a 65 minute talk and my talk is usually pretty strong and all the people said, "Father you beat us up." "Yeah I know." Anyway, but there was this woman there from Rwanda and she has a book called Live to Tell. I would encourage you to get the book. It is a phenomenal thing. Her story is unbelievable. Her name is Immaculée. And this woman, when there is the fighting in the Tutsi, between the Tutsi and whatever the other one was, they had killed, they were coming after, you know the two presidents got killed and they are all coming and they are actually, this is in '94 I think it was, killing people with hatchets - their neighbors and everything else. If you were a member of the Tutsi or whatever thing, they would come and hatchet you to death. They actually played a little bit if the 15 minute video they showed, the people on the radio would say these Tutsi or whatever are cockroaches. They are to be killed. Kill them. Children of a cockroach is a cockroach. Kill them. Older people of cockroaches are cockroaches. Kill them. And so people would run out of their houses. The people are their neighbors. And they would kill them. Hatchet them to death. Could you imagine sitting in your house and your neighbor coming over and then just killing you with a hatchet? Some of you think about that.

And so here it is, and so one of the Protestant ministers, she was Catholic, she is holding a Rosary; they put her for 90 days, her and nine other women in a little bathroom. And in this little bathroom they had to stay for 50 or 90 days, I forget what it was. And while they were there she was sitting there clinging to a Rosary. Then she looks up and she says she is having two fights in her life because they are outside and they are going to come in. They are looking at every house. And as they come walking in every

house they, you know there is one part of her saying be afraid there is no God, get out of here, don't do this. You are going to be killed in a moment. Prepare yourself. The other side was saying, "Jesus is real. Make an act of faith. Jesus is real. He will take care of you. Make an act of faith." And then she got up and she says, "I decided, it was a choice I had to make. I was not going to give in to the fear and to the doubt. I was going to come in to and make that act of faith before God." But she said she was going to make an act of faith and so she sat there and says, "God I believe you can do anything. You are the God of power. Show me God." And they came in to the house and they looked under the beds and they moved carpeting to see if there was anything. And they were locked in this door. There was this door there. And she says, "Jesus you can do anything. I believe in you." And the guy came and was right outside the door and he looked at the minister and he goes, "You know I trust you. You are a minister. You would never do anything to save these people and walked out. And so she decided not to give into fear but to give into the power and the faith of God.

How about you and me? Are we people that when we come before God that we sit there and we always know we can approach Him. He isn't mad at us because we sin and now He wants to push you away. No. God died for you to come to Him. And then when we do come to Him, do we humble ourselves before Him by getting on our face or on our knees or whatever? And then do we, instead of just asking, saying please God will you help me? We make these acts of faith. God you can do anything. You can heal me, if You want to. And so what does Jesus say? "Of course I want to. Of course, be healed." See that's why the Lord always comes and he wants to heal us and bring some healing, even if the healing is a spiritual healing, which is the greatest of all healings. And then He does that and He gives us and He brings us and He cleanses us and He makes us whole.

But that is from that side but from the other side we also need to be people who are Jesus. We need to be people that when everybody else is pushing everybody away, we have to be making sure we are inviting them in. When people are people who are scammed. You know when it comes to a scandal of the church and the priests. I was sitting there talking to someone else about this, we push them away. We judge them. We got all mad. How dare you? You are going to hell. That was very nice. That's very Christian. And I say, "When are we going to reach out to these people? Why don't we have a monastery in the middle of Canada where you take these priests and that who have sinned? And we put them there and we take care of them and we have them do a life of penance? Why do we jump on the ban wagon and say how dare you?

You know just this past week when you sit there and you saw things from the Legionaries of Christ. Their founder found out 23 years ago, he was a man who had a child. And so everybody was going... I was down there and there was a big group down in North Carolina. They were all crazy. Father can you believe this? And I go, "Oh yeah I can believe it." I said, "Isn't it amazing? The three worst sins in the early Church were adultery, murder and what? Apostasy. Who committed the sin of apostasy big time? St. Peter. St. Peter committed one of the greatest sins in the early Church. He denied our Lord. And Jesus didn't then go and look at Peter and say, "Okay Peter, you denied Me. You are out of here." What did He do? "Okay Peter, you denied Me. I forgive you and I restore you." And we are founded on a sinful individual, St. Peter, who was restored. And somewhere in our lives we need to be people that reach out to the people with leprosy no matter what that leprosy happens to be. And if they come

before the Lord and if they humble themselves and they make acts of faith we as the Christian community need to welcome these people back and restore them, or what are we? Just another group that thinks we are better than everybody else. Let me all give you a hint, there isn't one of you here and not me who isn't a great sinner who needs to be restored by faith. So if that is the way Christ treats us, that is going to have to be the way we treat others. Got it? Get it? Going to try to do it? You better. May each of you know His love today and forever. Amen.