

World Day of the Sick

Those who have seen the Oscar winning film *Philadelphia* will remember this powerful scene. The setting is the late 1980s when uncertainty, fear and even hysteria about HIV/AIDS gripped the public. Andrew Beckett, a rising Philadelphia lawyer, desperately tries to conceal his HIV diagnosis, fearing condemnation and ostracism. But his symptoms are multiplying, with the emergence of Kaposi's sarcoma that causes skin sores. As Andrew's illness becomes more evident, another attorney notices a telltale lesion on Andrew's forehead – the stigma of his shame and impending isolation. Andrew tries to explain it away as a tennis injury, but his colleague is not convinced. He conveys his concerns to his superiors, igniting a plot to dismiss Andrew from the firm.

In today's Gospel, Mark paints a similar scene for us. Not in Philadelphia, but on the dusty roads of Galilee, a marked man furtively negotiates the crowds gathering around Jesus. Jesus has retreated to the countryside, needing some downtime. He has just left Capernaum, overwhelmed by the numbers seeking his healing powers. He fears that his true message of salvation will be diluted by a focus only on these spectacular cures, obscuring the deeper call to wholeness and redemption. He cautions his followers not to publicize his miracles. Jesus wants his message to be foremost for his listeners.

Yet Jesus cannot help but notice the leper. Like the modern Andrew Beckett, this man is marked. The laws of Leviticus, as described in our first reading, have made him an object of shunning. Pathetic in his torn rags, he proclaims his uncleanness and falls, begging before Jesus. The crowd repulses, pushing back from the spot where the leper kneels. Many retreat to the fringes of the circle. A few leave, disgusted by the scene. Still, the leprous man persists. "Jesus, if you want to, you can heal me."

What has Levitical Law done to this man? It has falsely tied his illness to his spiritual worthiness. It has forced him to redefine his life solely by his infirmity. It has isolated him from community, the source of his life and potential healing. It has demonstrated that law is sometimes based on fear rather than love. But it has not stolen his hope. This ancient, unnamed man believes that God can break through any human condition or law. His faith and hope are a legacy for all who suffer down through the ages.

Our first reading helps us to comprehend the cultural and religious atmosphere that would allow human beings to be cut off from life in community. The passage recounts the points of Levitical Law. A priest of Aaron's line was to declare the leper unclean. The leper then must tear his garments and keep his head bare. He must continually announce his uncleanness and make his dwelling outside the camp. These admonitions go beyond protection of the community's health. They heap scorn upon the afflicted person and separate him from benefits and safety of kinship. These punitive measures were justified by identifying illness with sin. They assumed that sickness was God's punishment for moral failure. Echoes of this kind of fallacy and prejudice have lingered even to our own time, and even yet inform some of our political and societal choices.

In our second reading, Paul teaches us how to move beyond such law. Fourteen hundred years after the writing of Leviticus, Paul is challenged by its boundaries as he endeavors to spread Christ's Gospel of merciful inclusion. In the passage from Corinthians, the primitive Church, composed originally of converted Jews, ponders Mosaic dietary limitations. Should these new Christians eat what their Gentile brothers and sisters eat? Should they share a table with them? Paul asserts that, as Christians, we must live - not outside - but beyond the law. He affirms that the most important law is to give God glory and to build up the faith of the community. Paul points to the primacy of conscience as the guide to a compassionate, Christian life. He says that any practice, whether law or custom, must seek the benefit of the person and lead him or her to salvation.

With these two readings, we are prepared to hear the Gospel in the fullness of its meaning. We return to the scarred and exiled man, kneeling before Jesus. We can see now that he is burdened, not only by illness, but also, by his society's ingrained prejudice toward the sick and crippled. He bears the weight of unexamined censure born of a community's fear and ignorance. Christ's heart breaks for this man, and for religion used to segregate rather than include.

Jesus reaches out and touches the leper with a touch that will reverberate for all time. With his Godly hand upon this broken man, Jesus not only breaks through the barrier of Levitical law, but he touches every one of us – in our pain, illness, isolation and dying. He has taken each of our hands, encouraging us not to fear our suffering brothers and sisters. He teaches us how to be with them, to tend them, to love them.

And what of this man, now transformed by the touch of Christ? Is he truly healed? Has the miraculous grace penetrated his illness to reach his heart? Or is he simply “cured” – freed of leprosy, but bound still by a law that separates and excludes? Has the divine touch rendered him an agent of grace for others who suffer? What about the crowd gathered around Jesus that sultry afternoon, perhaps seeking miracles but not necessarily transformation? Did that gracious, healing stroke find their souls, making them more compassionate, long-suffering and hopeful? As we leave this worshipping community today, will that touch have found us?

Most of us will never be, or even meet, a leper. We will, however, meet many people who suffer not only from physical illness, but also from the unfounded societal constrictions and exclusions that have sickened them. We will meet people with mental challenges, addictions and alienating illnesses that make it hard to be with them. We will encounter people who have not had the stamina, means or awareness to preserve their health – and we will be tempted to scorn their ignorance. We will meet people whose situations so frighten, confound or sadden us that we retreat from association with them. We may even, one day, be one of these people.

What does this Gospel say to us today? Let us listen to Jesus’ response to the leper’s plea. He says, “I do will to make you clean.” Jesus wants us to enjoy the sacred wholeness that comes from God’s touch in our life. This is a wholeness that endures despite illness and suffering. It is rooted in hope, joy and a confidence that we already possess eternal life through the death and Resurrection of Christ. This wholeness is a grace beyond law; a profound healing which transcends “cure.”

When we are blessed with this kind of faith, we receive the challenges of life with openness and peace, realizing that in all circumstances, Christ accompanies us. This faith frees us to find meaning in human infirmity because it opens the door for God’s mercy to embrace us. This faith allows us to become healers in Christ’s name, witnessing to the sick and suffering by our presence, compassion and practical care.

On this World Day of the Sick, let us pray for all who suffer mental or physical illness; for the caregivers, clinicians, families and friends who accompany them. Let us pray especially for those who have no community to support them; for those who suffer and die alone. Let us pray that our own hearts will be steeped in compassion and moved to assist the sick whom we have the means to touch. Let us ask for the willingness of Christ to inspire and sustain us all.