

The Inclusive Community

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Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

**Compassion
Mark 1: 40-45**

The early Christian community wanted to get the life or image of Jesus right. So, Mark in the opening chapter of the first life of Jesus ever written gives us an overture or a prelude, catching the major themes of the life to follow. In this first chapter, Jesus is baptized, anointed by God for ministry, tested in the desert. Now that he has a sense of who he is, he calls the first disciples and, in his first appearance in a synagogue, he casts out demons and heals all who come to him. His ministry will be one of word but also of freedom from the demons which oppress us and the diseases that afflict us. The chapter ends with today's passage about a leper and this healer now about to be tested with curing the worst of diseases and, in the process, defining his ministry.

It is an astonishing first chapter with a powerful and dramatic conclusion. It is how the earliest Christians saw him and wanted us to see him.

We cannot be sure if the leprosy mentioned in Mark is the same leprosy as we know it today. Leprosy, as we know it, is a bacterial disease, fatal if untreated, bringing with it paralysis, external ulcers and loss of limbs. It is a harrowing affliction. At the time of Jesus, leprosy might have been other forms of disfiguring repulsive skin diseases.

Jesus was tested earlier in this chapter in the wilderness. He was alone and he struggled with his demons. Now, as the chapter ends, he is in public, already successful and sought after by multitudes. He is to be tested now in a different manner. A leper comes from the crowd and people withdraw. In silence the leper comes close to Jesus. There is a gasp. The man kneels and he makes an extraordinary act of faith in the young preacher.

Imagine this line as it was spoken then:

"If you choose, you can make me clean"

There must have been a stunned moment as everyone looked at the man and at Jesus.

Mark goes to the inner psychology of Jesus, the Jesus who, in the wilderness, cast out the demons that might destroy his ministry. The demon tempting him now is fear and the nearness of a repulsive disease and the loss of the multitude who would not go near Jesus again were he to become infected. Mark says he was "moved with compassion." He identified with the man. This was a miracle in its own right. A greater miracle followed.

He did not withdraw. It was a long time since the leper remembered someone who did not run away. The miracle is not complete. Mark says Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. The crowd would have gasped or turned to look away.

The miracle continues. How long a time it was since another human being spoke to the leper! Jesus addresses him as he touches him: “I do choose – not to run away, not to leave you alone, not to let you suffer. I want you to be clean, whole, loved.” Mark adds that the leprosy left him.

The worst thing about leprosy was not the disease, horrible as it was, but the isolation, the excommunication from all human community and all human contact.

Consider this. Someone might be paralyzed and even lose limbs but if that person is loved and honored, the affliction is infinitely easier to bear than if everyone finds that person repulsive and withdraws.

There is nothing we fear more than exile from human community. Exile was considered worse than death in the ancient world.

In our world, imprisonment is a form of exile we all dread. It is not as isolating as leprosy once was but it brings with it the sting of isolation, rejection, exclusion.

Jesus does not so much cure leprosy as he ends exile and banishes excommunication.

All violence is rooted in a perceived lack of respect and human contact. We cannot do violence to those who respect us and make a human connection with us. Violence is a symptom of isolation and rejection. It is the result of an infectious disease, the disease of rejection. It may lead to violence against the self, by suicide (I am not fit to live) or by feeling always degraded, always inferior (I will live but I will be careful to stay on the margins of life because I am not worthy).

Jesus proclaims that there are no lepers in the Kingdom of God. Even sin is not leprosy. Jesus will not let people perish from a lack of love.

When people come to church or come to communion, it is because they seek acceptance. Jesus brought the leper to the table of human community and broke bread with them.

You might choose not to come to the table but you must know you were invited and you will be honored there. And, if you do not come, you will be missed.

Everything is bearable if we hear a human word and feel a human touch and sense that we are loved. The lack of these is the worst of all diseases. Think of what would happen to a baby if no one spoke to it or touched it or loved it. Think of what that must do to us. Think of what kind of church it is that would do that to people. Think of whether Christ would ever find a home in a church or a world that not only excludes lepers but makes lepers by injecting them with the disease of rejection and isolation.

We need so little and really want so little. We want to hear words of life. We want to feel the touch of love. We want the bread of life at the table of those we love. We want to be respected and included. Nothing is worse than being shunned. If you do not have a word for me, I perish.

Phyllis McGinly the poet once wrote:

**Sticks and stones can break my bones
Aimed with an angry art
Words can sting like anything
But silence breaks my heart**

We want communion, community. We do not need a savior as much as we need a companion. Companion comes from the Latin word which means to break bread together. It is not sacraments or orthodoxy which saves us. It is companionship.

Jesus made the leper a friend. "I choose," Jesus says " I choose you. I choose to touch you."

Jesus was God's word and God's love to a world that felt it was not worthy. God never made a leper. Only we do. Sometimes the church does. The leprosy cannot continue if we choose to end it. The horror of leprosy is not the affliction of the leper but the choice by a human community or a church not to heal. All it takes is a word, a touch, a loving heart. Why would a church not do that? Why would a church or we not feel compassion for all the world's needless agony? If we want to feel loved in the arms of others and in the heart of God, why would we think there is not room there for everyone? Why would we push away those who ask us only to take away their fear and to make them feel worthwhile again?

This is the Kingdom of God, not a building or a creed, not worship or orthodoxy. The Kingdom of God is within us, implanted there by the greatest of all infections, the infection of love, the contagion of community, the hunger and thirst for words and touch, the fever in us to be included and to feel we belong.