

February 12, 2006

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The second reading has nothing to do with what I am going to preach about this morning, but I just think it is ironic here, if you listen to it, it says “avoid giving offence, whether it 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, be imitators of me as I am of Christ.” This is St. Paul talking. There is no one more controversial in the early church since St. Paul. He is the one that said “love is patient, love is kind, love is gentle.” And then he sits there and says in the letter to Galatians “the ones that are pushing circumcision, next time they do it, I hope the knife slips and they castrate themselves.” “Give no offence to no one, I please everybody.” Just a thought, but anyway! Being like Paul is what got me into trouble throughout the years. But, let’s listen to the first reading and the gospel today. They both talk of leprosy. And of course, we don’t have to deal with leprosy much in America. Leprosy of course is still a disease. There are still places of colonies of lepers. And people still have leprosy and people still die of it. Leprosy is by definition an outside cancer, if you will. Like if you have it in the hand, it will go through your whole body, but it will actually eat through your fingers so your fingers fall off, your hands fall off, your arms fall off, your ears fall off, your nose falls off. It is an exterior cancer that eats away at the body. And in the early times, they thought it was extremely contagious, and so, when someone had it, they not only had it affect them, they had not only had a death sentence given to them, they had go show themselves to the priest, because the priest was the community person. And then, from that moment forward, they were cut off from their family, cut off from the community, and then as they would walk around they would have to go “unclean, unclean, unclean” and everybody would run from them. Now think about it, what that would make them feel like! Think about you, if you were told that you had cancer now, and we didn’t know of course, that it is not contagious. And as soon as you had cancer, not only would you now be told that you have cancer and things could be bad, but for the rest of your life, you are not allowed to be a member of the community, you have to leave your family, and if anybody ever comes near you, you have to cry out “unclean” and then everybody would leave you. Can you imagine the loneliness? Can you imagine how you feel such despair? And there were thousands of people, of course that felt that way. And then we jump to the New Testament, and here is a leper and the leper has to cry out “unclean” and everybody runs from him. But then he sees Jesus, and he sees a man who he can sit there and would have compassion. So he cries out to Jesus and he makes an act of faith: “if you will it, you can cure me.” And what does Jesus do? It is the most phenomenal thing in the gospel! He reaches out – He touches him – He allows him to be with Him – He goes beyond the crowd and He touches him. And when He touches him he says “of course I will it! Of course I will it! Be healed!” And he was healed. Now, what does that have to do with us? Well, a couple things. The first thing we have to do of course is acknowledge that we are lepers. You know, next week I will be in San Diego, speaking at a Men’s Conference, and the following week I will be in

Louisiana speaking at another Men's Conference. And every time I speak at a Men's Conference, it is always for one thing – normally for one thing, not always – it is so I can talk about confession. So I can get the men that are there back to confession! And we do pretty well when I do that! But what I have to do first is help them to know that they are sinners. Huh? Now, I know I never do that here, in the parish, nobody in the parish ever realizes that they are sinful people, because I am very gentle when I preach! But the men, I have to be hard on, huh? In the midst of it – pregnant pause! In the midst of it they sit there and they have to come to know that they are sinful people and they have leprosy. See, the problem is – we either get two extremes – we either have the people that they feel they are sinners every moment of every day and they run to confession every other hour, because “I’m a sinful person...” and they are so focused on themselves! Then there are others who are so focused on their holiness and their goodness... “I don’t have much sin, I’m pretty good - once a year is plenty for me to go to confession.” There has to be the balance in between that we acknowledge that we are sinful, and in ourselves we can do nothing, but when we give it all to Christ, He can do everything. We don’t stay focused on ourselves, you see, we stay focused on Jesus. People that run to confession all the time we call them scrupulous people. Scrupulous people are only concerned about themselves and their sinfulness. They have stopped looking at Jesus because they are looking at themselves too much. Unscrupulous people who are always more concerned about how “I’m not a big sinner, and God has already forgiven me...and, I’m just a human being.” You know, someone told me the other day, one of my old kids emailed me and said “what do I have to do Father to come to know Jesus?” I said, “You have to turn away from your sin.” “But I’m always only a human, Father.” And I said “you are a human, son. You have Christ living inside of you.” So, we have to dismiss the two extremes and we have to come to the middle. And the middle is, knowing that we are sinful, or we have leprosy, but that’s ok, because Christ will heal us if we acknowledge it! The only time that it will kill us is when we refuse to acknowledge it. Every sin, you see, every thing has a communal aspect. You know, some people will sit there and say “mind your own business, Father. What I do is my business, and it is between me and God!” No, its not! Every time I sin, I affect you, and I hurt the body! Every time you sin, you affect me and you hurt the body! When we sin, we destroy each other! We bring the cancer or the leprosy into the community. And it’s only when we refuse to deal with our sin, when we refuse to acknowledge it and give it to the Lord, that it has the power to kill us. But once we acknowledge it, and we give it to Christ, of course He wants to heal us, and the healing of us will bring healing to our families, our communities, to our church. But it begins with me and Jesus. And it ends with Jesus, bringing you and me healing. So, there are a couple of things we have to do. The first thing we have to do – I have talked about it already – we have to acknowledge we are lepers, every one of us. The leprosy we have in our heart could be lust, it could be anger, it could be un-forgiveness of somebody, it could be you are judgmental, it could be gossip. All the things – every one of us have at least part of our leprosy – it is there. So the first thing is we acknowledge that – we don’t make excuses for that and you know, again, everybody has an excuse for everything. You know, I have an excuse for my sins, you have an excuse for your sins – it doesn’t matter how you got it – it matters

that you got it! It matters that you got it – it matters that I got it! I’m a leper and so are you! Let’s deal with it now! Now that we acknowledge this we have to name it. We then make an act of faith – to Jesus Christ who is hear and we say “Jesus, I am a leper.” And he says “I know, I can see.” “But Jesus, you can heal me – I can’t. Jesus, I have been trying to heal me for many years and it doesn’t work. Jesus, I try to be more disciplined. Jesus, I try to make new resolutions, Jesus I keep going into this.” And he says “I know. Are you done? Will you give it to me? Do you believe that I can heal you?” Do you believe that Jesus can set you free from your slavery, from your illness, from your sin? We have to believe that and they way we believe that is we bring it to Jesus. We don’t keep it – we don’t make excuses – we give it. “Ok, Jesus, here it is. And then, if you want to heal me, you can heal me.” And He says, “of course I want to.” You know, God is never out to get us. Never! He is never out to get us! You don’t have to be afraid of that sin – he was there when you committed it! He is not shocked by your sinfulness. GASP! The community would be shocked – but He will never be shocked. He knows all about it. Don’t be ashamed of it, bring it to Him. Always when people are struggling with their sin they say “Father, how do I stop?” And I say “invite Jesus into the center of the sin.” “Father, He doesn’t want to be there.” “Oh, He wants to be there, and He wants to set you free from it. But you are going to have to invite Him into it.” Invite Him into the thought – invite Him into the feeling – invite Him into the temptation! Invite Christ into it! When you do that, you are saying “Jesus, you are more powerful than this temptation! You are more powerful than this sickness! You are more powerful than this sin!” And of course He is! Of course He is! But you have to invite Him into it. Don’t hide from Him! Run to Him! “Lord, if you want to, you can heal me.” “Of course, I want to.” And then he says “be healed.” And how does He heal us? Buy touching us. Now, we can do this in many ways in the Catholic Church. Everything in the Catholic Church is done sacramentally, and it means it is something that you can touch and feel and experience. So, we confess our sins to a priest and a priest reaches out his hand and touches us or puts his hand over us and we can feel the power of forgiveness. It is something we do in our bodies! You can feel it! Today, when you receive communion, if before you go to communion, sit there and look at Him and say “look at me, Jesus, look at the sin – look at the struggle, look at all this leprosy. If you want to, you can heal me.” And then the God of the Universe, just as He touched that person, He physically touches you and I today and he says “of course I want to heal you.” The only thing that should ever keep us from communion is when we refuse to cling to Jesus, and we cling to our sin or our leprosy instead. If you cling to your sin or your leprosy, there is nothing He can do. But, if you acknowledge your sin or your leprosy, and you say “Lord, you can heal me” then there are great things that He can do. When you and I cling to it, we bring destruction to ourselves, our families and to our bodies – the Church. But when we acknowledge it and we bring it to the Lord, we bring healing – HE brings healing to ourselves, to our families and to the Church. So today, it is your decision and its mine. Will you acknowledge today your leprosy? Not make excuses for it – just acknowledge it. Will you bring it to Jesus, and will you let Him touch you and heal you and thus bring healing to all of us? It’s your decision. May each of you know His love today and forever. Amen.