
Be Made Clean

6 Sunday Year B
February 11, 2018

Some years back I saw the movie *Get Low* starring Robert Duvall. I can't say it was a very good movie, but it had a good underlying message. Robert Duvall played Felix Bush who was a hermit that lived out in the woods. All sorts of stories circulated about this mysterious man. Some say he killed someone in cold blood. Others thought he was in league with the devil. The truth was Felix Bush did do something terrible in his youth. Even though he knew all he had to do was confess his sin and be forgiven, Felix thought that sounded too easy, that he didn't deserve forgiveness, that he needed to punish himself. So, he lived in his own self-made prison out in the woods.

Finally, Felix discovered he was dying. Facing his own mortality, he sought peace before he died. That propelled him to emerge from the woods, confess his sin and find the peace of forgiveness: forgiveness from God, the community and finally to forgive himself.

This movement from the isolation caused by sin to reconciliation is really what this gospel is all about. You see all of us are meant to identify on a spiritual level with the man who has leprosy. We are all in a sense spiritually sick – we are all sinners.

Leprosy in the time of Jesus was a debilitating physical disease. It actually rotted away parts of your body. But it was also an excruciatingly emotional and psychological disease. One with leprosy was cut off from the community. You were required to wear torn tattered clothes. You could not participate in center of Jew life: worship of God. If anyone approached you would have to cry out “unclean, unclean” warning everyone that you were unfit, that you were untouchable. We can only imagine the shame, the isolation, the unworthiness, the bitterness that a leper might have felt. This is an image of sin! Sin drives a wedge between us and God. And sin alienates us from others. Our sin hurts the Body of Christ and often leaves us feeling alone, ashamed and unhappy.

But here's the good news: there is someone who can heal us and make us clean. His name is Jesus. Do you know what the name Jesus means? God saves! Jesus whole mission was to seek out and save sinners!

Let's learn from the leper in the gospel. He shows great courage in approaching Jesus. In the midst of our darkness and sin and suffering we should run to Jesus with confidence. And upon finding Jesus the leper fell to his knees. He worshipped the Lord. And then made a tremendous act of faith: if you wish you can make me clean. This is beautiful image of the sacrament of reconciliation. In confession we approach Jesus with courage, we fall to our knees. We show Jesus our leprosy, our woundedness, our sin and we beg for healing. And Jesus says to us, “Be made clean,” and we are really made

clean. Our sins are really forgiven. We have a living encounter with Jesus in confession and we leave confession a changed person, our sins are forgiven. As we prepare for Lent, I'm asking all of us to make a good confession this lent.

I want to make one last important point: Jesus reached out and touched the leper. Touching a leper would render you unclean. But, underlying this touch is the whole message of salvation: Jesus is willing to become unclean to make us clean. Jesus came to take our sins upon himself. He died so that we might have life. In that touch a marvelous exchange takes place: Jesus takes upon himself the man's leprosy and sets the man free from his illness. He becomes sin to set us free from sin.

While we are meant to identify with the leper in this gospel, we are also meant to identify with Jesus. What do I mean? We are called to reach out to the sick, the lost, and the marginalized. Who in your life is Jesus calling you to reach out to?

I want to close with the story of one of the saints in our mural: St. Mary Ann Cope. She was born in 1838 in Germany, but her family moved to the US when she was only one year old. They settled in NY. When Marianne was a young girl, her father became sickly and was in invalid at home. Marianne was the oldest child and so when she was in 8th grade she took a job in a factory to help support the family. She spent the next 10 years working and caring for her father until he died when Marianne was 24. At this time, her siblings were grown and she finally felt free to pursue this growing desire in her heart to become a religious sister.

She became a Franciscan sister and as a sister taught school, became a principal and then her superior assigned to be the administrator of a hospital in NY. St. Marianne eventually went on to be the superior of her community. It was while she was superior that she received a letter from the Bishop of Hawaii asking for sisters to come and take care of the lepers. The Bishop had sent out over 50 different requests and had been turned down, until Marianne received the letter. She told the bishop that they would not only help, but that she herself would come to the mission. St. Marianne set out with six of her sisters to serve the lepers. She ended up working with St. Damien of Molokai and took care of him as he was dying.

Marianne spent her life really caring for other people – her father and family, the students she taught, the sick in her time working in the hospital, and finally caring for the lepers who were the poor and marginalized of society.

Earlier I mentioned that when Jesus touched this leper a marvelous exchange took place: he became a leper to free us from leprosy. A marvelous exchange also takes place when we ourselves reach out and touch those who are on the peripheries. When we lose our lives in love for others we save our lives. When we reach out in love, we find meaning, purpose and interior joy. It is in giving that we receive. It is in dying to ourselves that we gain eternal life.