

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46

Psalm 32

I Corinthians 10:31—11:1

Mark 1:40-45

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One of the many sad consequences of religious fundamentalism, that seems so rampant in our world these days, is the tendency to interpret Holy Scripture very narrowly, even to the point of extreme literalism. When we do that, unfortunately, we risk missing the true or full intent of the message. A quick review of today's first reading and Gospel, for example, might lead one to conclude that they are simply about leprosy, an infectious disease of the skin and nervous system. But these readings hold much greater significance than that. They are about how we treat the broken and outcast of our society. They are about our inclination as a society to scapegoat our own fears and insecurities on others who are less powerful and more vulnerable. And they are about our willingness to take risks, as Jesus did, in doing what is right.

The Old Testament Book of Leviticus, from which our first reading is taken, is almost entirely legislative in nature, setting forth rules for daily life and for the holiness of ancient Israelites. Cleanliness and purity were of paramount importance, in part for the protection of the community. Skin diseases were considered signs of uncleanness as well as God's punishment for sin. As we heard in this reading, anyone with a suspect condition was publicly declared unclean and ostracized from the community. This physical and spiritual isolation was often a sentence of death. So, there was a lot at stake in today's Gospel when the leper approached Jesus and begged Jesus to make him clean. The leper was forbidden by Jewish law from

going near others, so by this action alone he broke the law. But the greater risk in this encounter was taken by Jesus. The leper had little to lose. Life, as he knew it, was essentially over, while Jesus' ministry was just beginning. By showing compassion and reaching out to touch the leper, Jesus also broke the law. But with his touch, the leper was healed. Fully aware of the risk he was taking, Jesus saw a need and acted on it. Then, as Jesus traveled from town to town in his ministry, he continued to cure the sick and drive out demons. His reputation grew, and he was mobbed by people wherever he went. That attention disturbed some religious leaders who felt threatened by his ministry and began building a case against him, resulting in charges that led ultimately to his passion and death on the cross.

Leprosy in these readings is symbolic of everything we fear, and the leper in the Gospel represents all people who are suffering and cast aside in our society. They may be homeless, incarcerated, or undocumented. They may be snubbed by others because of their religion, skin color, or sexual orientation. Or, it could be because of mental illness, divorce or death of a spouse, or because of gossip. How will we respond when we encounter the pain and alienation of others? Will we be among those yelling "unclean" or "illegal" or "unchristian" or some other label that serves little purpose other than to divert attention from our own fears and insecurities. Or will we follow the teachings of the Gospel and imitate Jesus by reaching out, touching, and healing. Reaching out will likely involve risks, as it did for Jesus. Our reputations, our livelihoods, and even our lives could be endangered. Each of us must be prepared to decide, with each encounter, "What am I willing to risk in doing what is right?" The

founding fathers of our country faced that decision when they declared independence. Some Europeans faced that decision during World War II when they reached out to protect their Jewish neighbors from the Holocaust. Some in this country faced that decision in the 1960s when they reached out and marched for civil rights. We hope and pray for less severe risks in our encounters, but we will face risks nonetheless.

The season of Lent begins on Wednesday. It is an especially good time for us to heighten our awareness of the needs of others and to reach out, touch, and heal wherever we can. Needs are all around us, and to help us find them, our Peace and Justice Advocates will once again offer Lenten activity cards after each Mass on Ash Wednesday and on the first Sunday of Lent. Each card will suggest something we can do during Lent, and hopefully continue throughout the year, to reach out and ease suffering in our community. You may be relieved to know that none of these suggestions involve giving up chocolate for Lent, and to my knowledge, none involve breaking the law or endangering your life. But there may be risks, and you may very well face the question, "What am I willing to risk in doing what is right?" Whenever you face that question, I hope you will remember the risk Jesus took when he reached out, touched, and healed the leper.