

February 12, 2012

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Hebrew people endured many trials on their long trek through the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Consequently, they had to take safeguards for their survival. Among these were many dietary and health precautions.

One of the most feared diseases was leprosy. They considered it very catchable and of course had none of the healing or preventive measures that we have available today.

So what recourse did they have to protect the community from this scourge? The only one available was to label the lepers and expel them from the tents of the community.

This is what happens in today's first reading.

*"As long as the sore is upon him, he shall declare himself unclean,
Since he is in fact unclean, he shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp."*

This exile was the physical punishment inflicted on the leper. But surely there was a psychological effect as well. To be considered "sick" is one thing; to be labeled as "unclean and outside the camp" was something else.

Through the centuries, this negation has been imposed on many more than lepers. Hitler declared this of the Jews; made them wear a patch identifying them as "different" and eventually exiled them to concentration camps for extermination.

The sad history of slavery was all about the insiders abusing the outsiders. Anyone who has been scorned in any way can understand the plight of the leper. Hitler's actions were the worst-case scenario. However, labeling and placing humans "outside the camp" can occur in so many ways. In Junior High, bullies do this. I have heard of it in senior citizen gated communities; a particular couple is labeled "persona non grata." It is the instinct of gangs who consider themselves insiders and others outsiders.

Also in our current society, the way undocumented Mexicans are described in modern American culture is a form of labeling. They are often referred to as "The Illegals." This type of description is dehumanizing. They are not "the illegals;" most are simple peasants simply striving to support their families at home. Yes, they break a law to do so. But how many of the rest of us have NEVER broken any law? I recently paid a deserved fine for neglecting to put up my handicapped sign when I parked in a handicapped zone. No one calls me "Fitz-The Illegal!"

When apprehended, undocumented workers are rounded up and expelled "Outside our camp." They usually arrive over the border, penniless and in need of food and for women and children, shelter. They're the modern lepers of our day, "outside the camp."

In today's gospel, Jesus shows us by his word and deed how "unclean people" are to be treated when the leper comes to seek his healing:

*Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him,
"I do will it. Be made clean!"*

As the followers of Jesus, we are to do the same moved with pity for the modern "lepers"—outsiders of our day.

We too are to be "*moved with pity*" as Jesus was.

That is why I serve on the Dinner Committee for the 2nd Annual Kino Border Initiative Dinner which provides emergency aid to expelled undocumented migrants just over the border at Nogales. This little way station is named for the Southwest Jesuit missionary and explorer Father Kino.

Headed by Father Sean Carroll SJ, this way station provides temporary shelter for expelled women and children, and often serves 200 meals a day to expelled migrants.

Our March 10 Dinner will raise funds to support this effort at reaching out to those "beyond the camp." If you would like to receive an invitation, contact me, [fatherfitz@hotmail.com] and I will see that you receive one.

In the Second Reading Today, St Paul encourages us: "*Brothers and Sisters, whether you eat or drink, do everything for the glory of God.*" On Saturday, March 10, we will gather at St. Paul's Parish in Phoenix to eat and drink for the glory of God and for the benefit of our expelled and often demeaned brothers and sisters served by the Kino Border Initiative.

A Reminder:

Tuesday, Feb. 14 is Valentine's Day. Actually it is Saint Valentine's Day. It is one sign of the obtuseness of our Liturgical Experts that our liturgy ignores this saint on his feast day. All the more reason St. Valentine should remind us to be lovers. It is the way of the saints!