

# The Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46
<i>Response</i>	I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 11
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	A great prophet has arisen in our midst, God has visited his people
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 1:40-45

Alright, welcome back everyone. It is the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B and we are still in Mark 1. We haven't even gotten out of the first chapter yet, but I hope you're enjoying the journey through this gospel. I know that I am and I'm excited to look at our final episode from chapter 1. It is the famous story of Jesus and the leper, and this is in Mark 1: 40-45. So we'll read that gospel together and then unpack it. It says this:

And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And he sternly charged him, and sent him away at once, and said to him, "See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people." But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.<sup>1</sup>

Alright, so what are we to make of this story? Obviously, it centers around a man with leprosy, which in the Bible is a term for a skin disease of some sort. There are

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

debates about exactly whether it's the same as what today is known as Hansen's disease — which is a disease in which a person's body, in a sense, decays while you're still alive. It can be terminal, and ultimately end up killing you very slowly, over time — or whether it was a broader term that applied to any kind of skin disease. The traditional interpretation of leprosy in the Bible is that it is the ancient form of what today we know as Hansen's disease, and that it was serious, that it was deadly, and certainly that if someone contracted leprosy, which was contagious, they would end up being exiled from the community, separated, quarantined, so to speak, for the rest of their lives, because there was no cure for it. In any case, what Jesus here is encountering is a man who has this skin disease, this leprosy. And the man comes before Jesus and, here's something interesting, he not only asks Jesus to heal him, he also honors Jesus by kneeling before him and by saying “if you will, you can make me clean.” So this is a profound statement of faith on the part of the man with leprosy. Why? Well, in part, just because Jesus has just begun his public ministry in the Gospel of Mark and, yet already, this man has enough faith to recognize that Jesus has the power to take his disease away, to heal him, and to cure him, and to make him clean; because what leprosy was regarded as doing was making a person ‘unclean’. We'll see that in a moment when we look at the Old Testament background.

This is a particularly strong act of faith too, in light of the Old Testament story of Naaman, the Syrian. This isn't the Old Testament reading for today, but it's worth keeping in mind. If you go back to the book of Kings, I think its 2 Kings 5, there's the story of Naaman the Syrian, who was a general in the army of Syria, and he was a man who had leprosy. And what happens in the story, just to make a long story short, he goes into Israel, he's sent into Israel to the prophet Elisha so that the prophet Elisha might heal him. And what's interesting about the passage, is when Naaman the Syrian comes to the king of Israel to tell about his desire to be healed, first he goes to the king and the king says this:

...“Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Only consider, and see how he is seeking a quarrel with me.”

That's 2 Kings 5:7. So notice in the Old Testament, the king of Israel's assumption is only God can cure leprosy. It's that serious, it's that terrible of a disease. So if you fast-forward to the New Testament, you could actually even infer that when this leper comes up to Jesus and says “if you will, you can make me clean”, there's a kind of implied faith that Jesus is more than just the king of Israel, the Messiah,

but that he is in some sense the divine son of God, or at least that he has divine power if he is, he can actually heal the man's leprosy.

So I think it's in response to this faith, as well as the suffering of the man, that Jesus then is moved with pity, it says, to heal him. And so Mark, with his favorite word, tells us what, “and immediately” — there it is again — and immediately he was made clean; emphasizing not just the dynamism of Jesus’ ministry, the urgency, but also his power. In other words, it doesn't take Jesus 10 months to heal somebody from leprosy. It doesn't even take him two months or two weeks or one day. He can do it instantaneously, because he has complete power over sickness, over suffering, and then eventually, as we’ll see, over death itself; which is what leprosy was, it was kind of like being the walking dead, right. You were alive, but your body was slowly dying. So he makes the man clean and heals him. Now, once that miracle is accomplished, we once again see Mark's interest in the Messianic secret, or I think actually a better term is the secret of Jesus's identity; because it's not always focused just on his Messiah-ship, it's just focused on who he is, who his identity is: the Priestly Messiah, Divine Son of God, whatever it might be. And in this case, Jesus commands the leper to “say nothing to anyone” about what Jesus has just done. Instead, he says to go and show himself to the priest and to offer a sacrifice— what Moses commanded — as a testimony to the people. So let’s look at each one of those aspects here.

First, just in regard to the secret. It's funny here, this is a funny story here, because Jesus says don't tell anyone about this, and immediately the guys goes out and tells everyone about it. And he tells so many people about it that Mark tells us Jesus couldn't any longer go openly about in that particular town, and he has to go out into the country, and people are still coming to him from every quarter. Why? Well because this guy is like the new Elisha. I mean if he can heal leprosy, what can't he heal? That's the idea, that's the implication of this miracle. This would've been a very unforgettable, active healing on Jesus’ part. And this is the passage, by the way, that has also led some people to wonder if the messianic secret was a case of reverse psychology. In other words, if Jesus was telling people don't say anything about it because he knew that they would actually go and tell everybody about it. I don't think that's a good explanation of the messianic secret though, because you'll see earlier in the Gospel, when Jesus tells the demon to be silent, he actually silences him and casts them out. So he effectively renders him mute. So we’ll see as we walk through the gospel, how Jesus is actually desiring a certain amount of secrecy about his identity until he can explain to the disciples what it really means for him to be the Messiah, to be the son of man, to grasp the mystery of the cross,

and ultimately too before he reveals it publicly and formally at his trial before the Sanhedrin. Okay, that's the first part.

The second part of Jesus' response to the leper is somewhat more obscure, but equally interesting. It's Jesus' otherwise puzzling command, "go show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded as a proof to the people." What in the world does that mean? It's kind of strange. If you look at the other miracles of Jesus in the gospels, Jesus doesn't ordinarily, in fact I don't think anywhere else does he ever say "okay now that I've healed you, I want you to go to the Temple and show yourself to a Jewish priest." That's kind of an odd thing. So what's he talking about here? Well remember, this healing was a specific kind of healing. It was a healing of a leper, and as we'll see in a second in the Old Testament reading for today, two chapters of the book of Leviticus are actually dedicated to the laws for leprosy. So part of the Old Testament was a series of regulations for what to do when a person contracted leprosy. How to evaluate whether they had leprosy, and then also what to do if the leprosy were at some point cleansed or healed. This is one reason, by the way, people think scholars have said maybe the word leprosy in the Old Testament doesn't always refer to the most severe form of skin disease, Hansen's disease, but rather refers to any kind of skin abnormality, like psoriasis or something like that, that a person may contract in the ancient world. Because if you're giving laws for what to do when the leprosy is healed, then it presupposes that it's actually possible to be healed. But there are lots of debate about that, you know, it's not exactly clear. But for our purposes here, what we need to remember is that Jesus specifically references the law of Moses, and he tells the leper to go and offer in the Temple a sacrifice for cleansing.

Now what's that all about? Well, if you go back to Leviticus 14, it tells us that one of the duties of priests in the Old Testament was to examine sores on people's bodies, in order to ascertain whether or not they had leprosy. And if the examination proved that a person had been healed, or no longer had a skin disease, then the priest was to instruct them in how to offer certain sacrifices that would reinstate the person into the community and enable them to go back into the Temple, and back into ordinary worship. Again, as we're going to see in a second, when we look at the Old Testament reading, the book of Leviticus made clear that if a person did contract leprosy, they were not only excluded from the Temple, but they were excluded from the community, the wider community at large. So in Leviticus 14, basically if you want to read it, it's a long chapter, it gives lots of, shall we say, overly detailed descriptions of exactly what the sore might look like: what color the hair would be, whether it has puss or not, and that kind of thing. So if you're into that kind of stuff, check it out, Leviticus 14. In any case, that was one of the jobs of the

priest, to examine the sores, and if they were determined to be healed of the disease, a person was supposed to offer a couple of different kinds of sacrifices. Two birds would be offered, one would be sacrificed and one would be let free, kind of like the scapegoats in the book of Leviticus. And then also, two lambs would be offered as a sacrifice. And then also when that took place, the person who was healed would wash themselves, wash their clothing, and then after offering the sacrifice, they would be reinstated into the community. So the reason Jesus tells this man to do this, is so that he can formally be re-integrated into the Temple and in the community by virtue of the witness of the official priest in the Temple, who would examine. So that's why Jesus says, offer what Moses committed as a proof to the people, in other words, as a public testimony to the fact that you have been cleansed. So Jesus here, interestingly, shows very clearly to us that he was a Jew. I've said this millions of times in my teaching, you know, Jesus of Nazareth was Jewish. And even though he comes to fulfill the Jewish law during his lifetime, we see even here, very clearly, that he's being obedient to the Jewish Torah. He's following the regulations of the Jewish Torah, with regard in this case, to the healing of the man with leprosy. Alright, so that's the gospel.

Now when we go back to the Old Testament, the reading for today is obvious, in terms of why it was chosen, because the Church gives us a very short selection, but an important one, from the actual laws on leprosy in the book of Leviticus, every Christian's favorite book of the Old Testament to read. I'm joking, but it actually is one of my favorite books of the Old Testament to read. But one of the reasons people don't read Leviticus very frequently, or don't like Leviticus, is precisely because of the leprosy laws, because you get into these long detailed laws about sores, and hair, and different kinds of diseases, and it can be a little overwhelming. But in this case, the Church has chosen a very brief selection that really helps bring to life what it would've been like in the Old Testament times, or the time of Jesus, to be a person with leprosy. So let's see what it says. The first reading, Leviticus 13:1-2 says:

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests,

So you see there, that's the reference to the law saying you have to go to the priest for an examination. Now the lectionary here skips about 40 verses and goes to the end of the chapter:

he is a leprous man, he is unclean; the priest must pronounce him unclean; his disease is on his head. "The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.

Alright, so pause there. Obviously the reason the Church picks these two verses, or the set of verses, is because they provide the necessary background for understanding Jesus' response to the man who had had leprosy. First, the law of going to the priest to be examined, as in the first verses. Second, the idea that the priest is the one who pronounces judgment. It's the priest who declares a man clean or unclean. And then third, the law for what happens if a person is unclean. He is sent outside the camp, meaning he has to live outside of the town, outside of the community, and he has to tear his clothes and let his hair grow long, and loose, so that people will be able to identify him, or her, as a leper, as a person with leprosy. And just in case they don't realize it, if anyone should approach them, notice it says "he will cover his upper lip and cry unclean, unclean." Sometimes people wonder what does that mean, cover his upper lip. It's probably an image here that he is shouting. In other words, before someone gets close to you, you would shout unclean, unclean, in order to let them know that you have leprosy, so that they wouldn't contract a contagious disease from you. Now you can imagine, or at least you can try to imagine, just how isolating it would be in Old Testament times, and at the time of Jesus, to have this kind of disease, to have leprosy. It would effectively mean not only that you were no longer able to worship in the Temple, or in the synagogue, but that you would be cut off from loved ones, from family, and certainly from strangers, anyone who might contract the disease from you. And so on the basis of this verse, scholars have posited the existence of what we call leper colonies, you know, places where people who have the contagious disease would live together, but away from the wider community. We don't know for certain if that was what was going on in Jesus' day. In fact, the very story of the man with leprosy is a little interesting, because he appears to come and encounter Jesus in a situation when Jesus is not necessarily off at a leper colony, or something like it, when it's not exactly clear where it happens. But in this case, the law of Leviticus says that they're to live separately; they're to stay outside the camp. So that's the Old Testament reading.

Alright, now what about the Psalm for today, because usually the Psalm forms a bridge between the Old Testament and the new. And in this case, the Psalm does that but it actually helps us to see beyond the skin disease that's under question,

and it points forward to the spiritual significance of Jesus' healing miracle in this case. So the Psalm is from Psalm 32, and basically the theme of the Psalm is the joy of forgiveness. It's the joy of being forgiven of one's sins. The Psalm begins:

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.  
Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

And then if you skip down to verse 5 it says:

I acknowledged my sin to thee,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD";  
then thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.

Now you might ask, well wait a second, what does that have to do with leprosy? What does that have to do with the Old Testament and the gospel reading? The Old Testament's about leprosy, the Gospel is about leprosy, the Psalms about confession and the forgiveness of sin. Well I think, in this case, the Church, by uniting these two, is trying to help us see the spiritual symbolism or the spiritual significance of leprosy. If you look at ancient Christian writings, the ancient Church Fathers, it was very common for them to say that leprosy in the Old Testament was a kind of visible outward sign that symbolized the spiritual reality of sin. In other words, leprosy can kill you, leprosy makes you sick, physically. Well, what does sin do spiritually? It makes you sick and spiritually it is deadly, it can kill you. Leprosy separates you from other people, right, separates you from the worship of God; it separates you from the community. Well, what does sin do? Sin divides us. It separates us from God and it separates us from our neighbor. And so, just as there's this mysterious connection between suffering and sin in the Old Testament, especially, and between sickness and sin in the Old Testament, the same thing is true about leprosy. That on one hand, it's just it's a physical disease, and the laws are given to regulate it in the Old Testament. On the other hand, it points forward to the true spiritual leprosy of the soul, which is sin, and the joy of being healed of the sickness of sin when we confess our sins to God, and when we are forgiven. Because remember, in the Old Testament, priests had two duties: they would both pronounce a person clean of physical diseases like leprosy, but they would also pronounce a person to be forgiven of their sins through the sacrifices of atonement that were often in the Temple. So the Church here, I think, is inviting us to see the deeper spiritual significance of the man's leprosy in the gospel episode, as a

kind of sign of the fact that Jesus has power not just over sickness of the body, but over the sickness of the soul as well. Also, by the way, quick side note, I can't remember where this was, but I remember one of the Church Fathers actually said the fact that it was necessary to go to a priest in the Old Testament to be declared clean of leprosy was a kind of typology pointing forward to the New Testament. In which, if we have a mortal sin, a deadly sin, instead of a deadly disease, we can't just declare ourselves clean, we need to go to an appointed priest in the sacrament of confession and receive that spiritual cleansing, that spiritual healing, and be declared forgiven by a priest of Jesus Christ. Alright, well that's a little reference from the church fathers.

In closing, I'd like to highlight the living tradition with regard to Jesus' statement of leprosy. In this case, I've got two quotes I want to share with you. The first one is from Origen of Alexandria. He lived around 200 A.D. He was one of most prolific biblical scholars in the Old Testament, and in his homily on this episode of the healing of the leper from the gospel, Origen says this about the mysterious act of Jesus touching the leper, right. Because one of the curious things about the story is Jesus touches the leper, which is not something you would do, right. You would not touch the person because you might contract the disease, and so Origen has this to say:

And why did [Jesus] touch him, since the law forbade the touching of a leper? He touched him to show that "all things are clean to the clean" (Titus 1:15).

That's a quote from Titus 1.

Because the filth that is in one person does not adhere to others, nor does external uncleanness defile the clean of heart. So he touches him in his untouchability, that he might instruct us in humility; that he might teach us that we should despise no one, or abhor them, or regard them as pitiable, because of some wound of their body or some blemish... So, stretching forth his hand to touch, the leprosy immediately departs... Let us consider here, beloved, if there be anyone here that has the taint of leprosy in his soul, or the contamination of guilt in his heart? If he has, instantly adoring God, let him say: "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Origen, *The Healing of the Leper*; translation in T. C. Oden and C. A. Hall, *Mark*, p. 26



A beautiful reflection from Origen there, making two basic points. First, when Jesus touches the untouchable leper, it shows us that we are to despise no one because of physical sickness, or of some deformity, or abnormality, which is something people do, right. I mean a lot of times, if we see someone who is sick visibly, on the outside, we can recoil from that. That's a natural human reaction to be shy or even to avoid that person. And because we are scared of illness, and illness is mysterious, and it can be repugnant at times, right. In the face of that, Jesus teaches us to love the sick. He teaches us to love those who are ill and not to be afraid to reach out, and touch the person who is sick. But the other thing Origen says is on the spiritual side. We need to also look inside ourselves and say do I have spiritual leprosy? Do I have the terminal illness of sin? A sin that is contagious that can spread from me to others, that can infect my community, infect my family, infect my home, infect my workplace. And if I do, do we have the faith of the leper to say to Jesus I need you to cleanse me. And if you will, you can heal me of this sin, you can deliver me from this sin, you can deliver me from this deadly disease that I contracted in my soul. That's the ultimate significance of that. And I think that the next quote here from the handout, from John Chrysostom, drives home the point. He says:

He touched the leper to signify that he heals not as servant but as Lord. For the leprosy did not defile his hand, but his holy hand cleansed the leprous body.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, if anyone else in ancient Israel would touch a leper, it would mean they contract the disease. But when Jesus Christ touches the leper, it's not that the disease that flows from the leper into him, it's the healing that flows from him into the leper. And the same thing of course is spiritually true as well, right. That when Christ touches us, we do not defile him, he cleanses us, if we have the faith that the leper had.

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<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom, The Gospel of St. Matthew, 25.2; trans. in NPNF1, 10:173