

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany 11th of February 2018.
Re'vd Peter Deng Mayen. St. Mark's Parish.
Readings: 2Kings 5:1-14, Ps 30, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Mark 1:40-44.

Prayer:

Loving God, May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our heart be acceptable to you O LORD, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Theme: Jesus's appropriate touches of grace restored human conditions.

The selected readings today in our lectionary touch on human conditions and how God's power to heal infirmities is significantly demonstrated through faith and grace in Christ Jesus.

The Gospel of Saint Mark revealed how Jesus healed a person with a leprosy who was unclean, very sick. His physical contact with the unclean person makes Him also unclean even though He is a Rabbi or teacher according to the Torah's Laws. This is shocking, yes!

Last year in 2017 in December, I went to Africa to visit my parents with whom we have been severely separated by war. Immediately after my arrival and having had a restful night, I decided to make a tour through the city of Kampala. While walking, I saw a person suffering from leprosy. This person was in so much pain. There were no visible hands, this person was really suffering. Therefore, I was moved with compassion, tears and love to provide money as assistance for him in order to purchase food or other essentials things. This particularly situation touched me personally. Why? Because, the person was totally physically incapacitated to sustain his life and was not able to live a life with dignity and integrity.

The Gospel of Mark's explains how Jesus was approached by a Leper, "A leper came to Him begging Him, and kneeling he said to Him, "if you choose, you can make me clean." What do we know about leprosy as a disease? Well, leprosy in ancient Israel was the most dreaded disease. Leprosy is a contagious skin disease that not only affects the skin for example, the color, texture, odor and throat, but also slowly destroys human nerves that sense pain in our bodies. This person was disfigured by this contagious disease that caused him to be socially unfit to associate with people within the Jewish community. It was surprising how harshly a leper was treated in the teaching of the Torah - the five books of Law. For example, leprosy was the worst and most dangerous disease that a person could be afflicted with. The necessary way to deal with it was to immediately separate from people and from gatherings including the temple worship. Lepers were considered unclean, unwelcome and socially outcast people who lived in a ghettos and camps, according, to Numbers 5:2. Their treatment was mentally destructive and socially demeaning. And this form of treating the leper was part of the commandments in the Mosaic teaching. According to Leviticus 13:45-46, a leper had to wear torn clothes, keep his/her hair unkempt, cover his/her mouth and cry out "Unclean! Unclean!" By law this was how the person with leprosy lived within the Jewish community, it was by any standard shambolic and unethical by our modern well informed ethically morally upright standards. This inhuman treatment of God's people was part of the Old Testament teaching. But in the good news, the best way to overcome social separateness has come with Jesus new commandment, to love God and His people.

Now, Jesus response to the treatment of the leper overrode the Mosaic tradition. The good news brought by Jesus broke down walls and barriers of religious self-righteousness separatism. Jesus deliberately touched the leper, the unclean person, sending a message to the leaders of the community, particularly the Scribes and the priests, that their isolation and uncleanliness norms must be disrupted through genuine compassion, love and mercy and gracious touch that uplifts the previously untouchable person.

And therefore, at Jesus command, one of the most feared people in the Jewish community, the leprous person, was told to join the temple congregation and appear before the Priest as a true member of God's family. This act of compassion from Jesus was a real smack in the face of the religious system operating with a narrow interpretation of the Old Law. Jesus' compassion encouraged the leper to feel welcome into God's family without preconditions.

Therefore, Jesus is commanding us, the church, to be inclusive and loving even towards people considered to be a threat by the state, the disabled, and other groups. They are indeed God's people who are loved and valued very much.

Jesus' compassion towards the leper transformed the image of the church as both a caring and a loving community. However, modern people like us should consider to think again whether we are better than the ancient Israelites or are we similar in our approach to issues that our society struggles to deal with. For example, the threat of refugee settlement stigmatized with job losses, and the debates around marriage and divorce. Our role as Christ's followers is to be obedient and warmly embrace all God's people according them the same treatment we would long to be given when we ourselves are in need, like the leper seeking Jesus out for healing and compassion.

Jesus's way of dealing with people who are socially disadvantaged paints a clear picture and calls us to emulate His compassion in our life and share this gift of love and kindness with our families and friends. As a Church community that has been transformed by Jesus Christ's love and compassion, we have the responsibility to treat people with care and love despite their social background and class.

We know the value of appropriate and inappropriate touches and the consequences of such contact. It is a joyous experience when my kids come running toward me just to be embraced with love from Daddy and raised up high. There is tremendous laughing and giggling, because of the welcoming environment and context of a family as one unit. As we all understand, physical touch is important because it shows how we feel comfortable with one another. Jesus the King gave to the suffering sheep, the leper who was labeled and rejected by the leaders of the Church, the freedom and liberty we value. This leper understood both isolation and loneliness and desired to belong by kneeling seeking to be touched by Jesus. By indwelling faith in God's power, Jesus stretched His hand and restored the man's health immediately.

However, touching is also sometimes inappropriate. As a Church community we are reminded of the detrimental effect on victims of sexual abuse, especially sufferers within the care of the Church. The Royal Commission has reported many cases which have revealed the damage to what we profess and advocate. However, the reality is that the Church community is held to account and must repent from our past handling of circumstances that have caused pain to God's beloved people. Inappropriate touching brought long pain and suffering and should not be encouraged or condoned by Church leaders. Therefore, we need to take great responsibility in this area.

Jesus's touching humbly demonstrates His authority in a gracious manner and by showing compassion. He healed the leper and sent him back to the community as clean as a snow. Fully restored. Jesus power over human conditions restored the leper because of the man's faith, as the Scripture says in Mark 1:v. 40, the leper came, kneeling down before the Son of God and asking to be healed and let go to be free, to live among his loved ones.

However, socially and religiously Jesus became unclean for touching the leper. But His love and mercy was overwhelming, extending His healing hand He touched and restored the leper. Jesus touched the leper in order to challenge the old law, the teaching of the Jewish community that divided God's people. Instead, Jesus encouraged the people of God be to welcoming and to love the most unloved people. Jesus' touching of grace brings joys and praises and really redefined our position in the community we live and serve.

In vv.44, Jesus gave guidance and instruction to the leper to tell nothing at all to any person but only to show himself before the Priest. But the leper purely disobeyed Jesus commands because of the restoration he had received from the disease. He went and proclaimed with joy the great miraculous ministry of Jesus to the whole community in which Jesus worked. Because of this story, Jesus was overwhelmed by socially disadvantaged people demanding to be healed. The leper like us looked and sought the savior. And Jesus restored him. And so is the Church is called to act with pure compassion, love and mercy toward people with all sorts of difficulties living in our neighborhoods with similar needs. The church of Christ must encourage inclusivity to all God's people. In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.
Amen.