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What Jesus and leprosy can teach about marriage

Thomas Gumbleton | Feb. 16, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

As Sr. Marie mentioned before our Liturgy, we celebrate today throughout the whole world a special day of celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage. It's World Marriage Day. Of course, we want to try to reflect on the Scriptures in the light of this special day, but as I read them over, I thought this would be a real challenge. First of all, from the Book of Leviticus, we hear all the rules and regulations about how to worship according to the Jewish tradition.
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In the Gospel -- have you ever gone to a wedding where you have read the Gospel about how to cure a leper? I don't think so. We usually hear of the wedding at Cana or the talk of Jesus at the Last Supper, Gospels about trying to learn and live a life of love, but as we try to listen deeply to today's lessons, I think we can find a very clear indication of why these readings are appropriate for World Marriage Day.

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46
Psalms 32:1-2, 5, 11
1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1
Mark 1:40-45
Full text of the readings [1]

First of all, we have to put the Gospel lesson into its context. As we heard in the first lesson, lepers were told that they must separate themselves from the community. They must wear a special kind of clothing so they would be set apart. They must even cry out about themselves, "Unclean, unclean," so nobody would come close. This was not the kind of leprosy that we know today as Hansen's disease, but it was a form of disfigurement and illness of the flesh, of the skin.

People could pass this on from one to another, so it was dangerous to stay within the community. Of course, that made the situation of one who was called a leper extraordinarily difficult. Imagine being totally cut off from your community, to live in isolation. When this leper comes to Jesus, that's where he's coming from. He says to Jesus, "Lord, if you want to, You can make me clean. You can wipe away this uncleanness, this form of skin disease that makes me be separated from my people."

First of all, as Mark says, Jesus has profound compassion for this person, which means that you feel with. You enter into the suffering, the pain, so that you share the very same things this person is experiencing. Sometimes in this Gospel you read that Jesus had pity, but pity is not really what it was. It was compassion. So Jesus reaches out and touches the man, breaking down that barrier of isolation, drawing the person in out of love.

Jesus felt his isolation, his pain, and He touches him. Jesus shares that, but then, by sharing it, Jesus heals the man or cleanses him, so that now he is able to rejoin the community. That kind of love that Jesus shows for this person is the kind of love that all of us are called to share, to reach out in a spirit of healing, a spirit of compassion, the share the suffering of others, to be joined with them. If we join together, people are healed. They are lifted up. Their suffering becomes more bearable.

That's a call that is given to all of us as disciples of Jesus, to imitate that spirit of compassion and love that Jesus does so quickly, even though it meant, according to the law, that Jesus was making Himself unworthy to go into the Temple. Anyone touched by a leper would share the same ritual uncleanliness, but Jesus didn't care about

that. He loved, and He was compassionate. He touched the man and then cleansed him.

Even though that's the call to all of us, as we celebrate World Marriage Day, we can put it in the context of the Sacrament of Marriage. Any sacrament, as you know, is a sign of something. It's a sign that makes it happen. When we're cleansed with the waters of Baptism, a sign of new life, we begin to live that new life. That's what a Sacrament does. It's a sign that makes whatever is being signified actually happen.

In marriage, the sign of marriage is a covenant between two people who give themselves to each other in complete love, like the love of Jesus for His community. That's what we pray at a wedding, that this sacrament will be a sign. These two people showing us the love of Jesus for His church, for His community, an unconditional love, an unlimited love, a totally honest love, a complete love.

Two people give themselves to each other in marriage as that kind of a sign, and as they live and try to make this happen in their lives, that sign begins to work within the whole church. The love of married people, we often say, this sacrament is the foundation of our community of disciples, the foundation of our society. That is why, because as two people in marriage live out the love that Jesus shows for His church, it begins to spread through the whole community, and it enriches the community.

That's why the Sacrament of Marriage is so important for the individual couple and their family, but also as it becomes a sign, an effective way of making that love of Jesus spread. So in our church, as we experience the effect of the Sacrament of Marriage in our own community, it will enable us to be more like Jesus, that each one of us will be able to fulfill what is being asked of us in today's Gospel: to be like Jesus in reaching out to those who are isolated, those who are cut off, those who suffer in any way.

We need that, of course, within our immediate families. We need it in our parish family. We need it in our general society, this spirit of the love of Jesus. We need it in the whole human family. That's how the love of God will spread throughout the world. Everyone can be enriched as we experience that Sacrament of Marriage with its effect going out into our whole community, into our church and into our world.

Each of us should try to think of the way in which I can be more like Jesus, as He shows in today's Gospel. Where can I reach out and touch someone and bring healing and love into that person's life? Where can we do that in our society? Certainly there are those in ever-increasing numbers who are in great need, and by our reaching out and trying to touch, to lift up, we heal them and change our society and our world.

If we have this spirit and each of us tried to live out the love that Jesus demonstrates in the Gospel, the love that a married couple covenanted with each other to live for their whole life the love that then spreads to our whole community, how we could change our world. We really could make it a world in which the reign of God's love, peace and joy would break forth ever more fully.

In the Letter of St. Paul to the Church at Philippi, he tells them at the beginning of the second chapter, "If I may advise you in the name of Jesus, and if you can hear it as the voice of love, if we share the same spirit and are capable of mercy and compassion, then I beg of you, make me happy. Have one love, one spirit, one feeling. Do nothing through rivalry or vain conceit. On the contrary, let each of you consider the others as more important than yourselves. Do not seek your own interests, but rather, that of others. You must have the attitude, the mind, the way of Jesus and be the same as our Lord, Jesus Christ."

That is what we are being called to by God's Word today, and as all of us try to live this out, we will bring greater joy and fulfillment of life into our own immediate lives, into our families, into our church and into our community. Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus, and act according to the way of Jesus.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly

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