

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time: October 9, 2016

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“IS INDIFFERENCE TODAY’S LEPROSY?”

Whenever I hear a story in the gospels about Jesus encountering a person with leprosy, I try to imagine what it would be like to be that person with a disease considered so contagious, that it would result in being totally ostracized by the community. A leper living at the time of Jesus had to live outside of the city because others were afraid of catching the disease. Lepers had to beg and hope that people would have pity on them and bring them something to eat and drink. They were separated from their family and friends; and even more tragic, they were shunned by their faith community because they were considered unclean. This disease, which we now know as Hansen’s disease, affected a person completely: physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually. It was by far the worst disease a person could have in biblical times.

What is the world’s worst disease today? Ebola? Zika? AIDS? It may not be what you think.

On September 20, Pope Francis gathered with religious leaders from around the world in Assisi to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the World Day of Prayer for Peace. Continuing the legacy begun St. John Paul II and followed by Pope Benedict, the Pope prayed with leaders of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and dozens of other religions as a sign of unity and to once again raise a collective voice that, “peace alone, and not war, is holy!” During his remarks, Pope Francis called on believers of all faiths to confront the greatest sickness of our time: indifference. He said: “It is a virus that paralyzes, rendering us lethargic and insensitive, a disease that eats away at the very heart of religious fervor, giving rise to a new and deeply sad paganism: the paganism of indifference.”

Prior to this comment, Pope Francis spoke about the living conditions of the refugees he and Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople visited on the island of Lesbos in April. These are people forced to live outside of cities in camps with deplorable conditions. They are dependent on others for food, water, shelter. They are separated from their families, friends and faith communities. They are our brothers and sisters fleeing war and famine, seeking safety and a better life for their children. Yet they are people whom

society eyes with suspicion and tries to keep outside of their zone of safety. Are not today's refugees and migrants being treated the same way as the lepers of Jesus' day?

Both our first reading, from the second book of Kings, and the story of Jesus curing the ten lepers, go out of their way to show God's grace is meant for all people. Naaman is from Syria. Until he encounters the prophet Elisha and is cured of his leprosy, he has never heard of the God of Israel, Yahweh. He has worshipped the gods of his own religion. Some would say he was a pagan. Similarly, one of the ten lepers Jesus cures is a Samaritan. The Samaritans were considered foreigners and heretics by the religious leaders of Jesus' day. Yet, as Jesus points out, it is only "this foreigner who has returned to give thanks to God" after being cured. By pairing the story of Naaman the Leper with the Cure of the Ten Lepers on this twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary time, the Church wants us to recognize that God's grace is available to people of all faiths and nationalities, especially to those who are sick and marginalized. The refrain of today's responsorial psalm puts a bow on this theme: "The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power!"

Pope Francis continually preaches the message that God is not indifferent to those who are shunned and ostracized by the world. The gospels show us time and again that Jesus has a special love and preferential option for the poor. Christians are called to have that same compassion for the least of our sisters and brothers. It is not enough to provide for ourselves and our families. We are also our brothers and sisters keepers. We cannot be like the rich man we heard about in the gospel two weeks ago who did not even know Lazarus sat outside his front door begging for food each day. The greatest disease of our day is indifference.

So what is the cure for this indifference? It is simpler than you might think.

Let's go back to the scripture passages for today. Notice how simple the cure is for both Naaman and the ten lepers. In the story of Naaman, in the verses immediately before today's passage from two Kings, he is indignant and ready to leave when he is told by Elisha to plunge seven times into the Jordan River. Naaman was expecting something more difficult or extraordinary. But his servants convince him that since he was prepared to do something difficult, why not do the simple command of the prophet and plunge seven times into the Jordan River. When Naaman lets go of what he thinks the cure will entail - something hard, difficult and challenging - he is immediately cured of his leprosy.

Similarly, in the story of the ten lepers, the cure is very simple. Jesus tells them, "Go show yourselves to the priests." In most of the miracle stories found in the gospels, Jesus touches the person, utters some words about being healed or made clean and there is an immediate cure while the person is with Jesus. This miracle happens away

from Jesus while the ten are on their way to the priests. As they are walking, they suddenly realize they are cured. Only the Samaritan returns to give thanks and praise. And thankfully he does, because it is then we learn from Jesus that it is by faith that the leper has been saved. What is the cure for indifference? Have faith in God and trust the little work we are shown by God to do, will bring about the healing.

Sometimes we distance ourselves from problems because we think the problem is too difficult to solve. The refugee and migrant crisis is a perfect example. Some want to wash their hands and say this is not our problem. “Let’s secure our borders, keep these people out and let them figure out for themselves how they will survive.” That approach is the “paganism of indifference” Pope Francis is calling us to abandon. He reminds us, “Peace is a gift from God and it is only with God’s help that our works can bear fruit.” When we are dealing with complicated issues that we are tempted to run from, our first step is to realize we don’t have the answers. Only God knows how to move hearts from a place of distrust and fear. “True peace,” he said, “is not a result of negotiations, political compromises or economic bargaining, but the result of prayer.” The first step to healing our indifference is prayer.

When we invite God to lead us and shape our hearts we accomplish more than we ever dreamed possible. Prayer begins to change us. We begin to see the beggar at our door and the refugees in camps at our borders are our brothers and sisters. We realize we could just as easily be the person on the margin, someone feared, shunned and abandoned. By recognizing the human dignity of every person and my responsibility as a Christian to help create a world that promotes the welfare and dignity of all of earth’s inhabitants, I am then called to act the way Jesus did: with mercy, compassion and a preferential option for the poor and marginalized. Prayer first, followed by a change of heart which leads to concrete actions.

Pope Francis is not so naïve as to think prayer is enough. “A peace that is not illusory must be accomplished through concrete actions of assistance to those in need and cannot be achieved with the virtual approach of one who judges everything and everyone using a computer keyboard, without opening his eyes to the needs of his brothers and sister and dirtying his hands for those in need.” We cannot solve the world’s problems from our computer screens and couches. We will have to get our hands dirty, and that will entail sacrifice. However, we will not be alone and God’s grace will do the heavy lifting and move the obstacles that appear to be immovable.

Recently, I was watching the news and there was a story about a Baptist Church in Marietta, Georgia that has adopted six Syrian refugee families. After these families were thoroughly screened by the U.N., the FBI, and Homeland Security they were welcomed by this faith community with housing, furniture, food, employment, schools, translators

and everything else they need to help start a new life where they are safe and free from the violence of civil war. That led me to “Google” refugee families and churches, and I found dozens of churches, of all denominations, across the United States doing the same thing. This reminded me of the late 1940’s and early 1950’s after World War II and as the Soviet Union was taking over Eastern Europe, many churches in this country sponsored refugee families. It also made me wonder if our parish is being called to pray and discern if God is asking us to do more in response today’s refugee crisis.

I do not know where this discernment will lead us, but I do know that our Holy Father’s challenge to confront the great disease of our time, the paganism of indifference, has moved me at my core. I hope it is also moving you.