

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sometimes translators of the Bible get it wrong for all the best reasons. We are used to hearing in today's Gospel that Jesus was "filled with pity" when he encountered the leper, but the Greek word Mark uses is more accurately translated "anger," not "pity." With the exception of the cleansing of the temple in John's Gospel, generations of translators found it hard to imagine Jesus angry. Jesus' anger, however, provides a wonderful insight into him, and a strong challenge to us.

Anger tells us that something is wrong. It is an important and valuable emotion. Anger is value-neutral. It's what we do with it that defines its effect in our lives. Some of us sit on it and stew. Others gain energy from their anger to right the wrong.

People who had any type of skin disease in first century Palestine were called lepers. They were treated shamefully. They had to live outside the villages and towns, call out "unclean, unclean" when they came near others, could never attend the temple, and were considered cursed by God and so excluded from the Chosen People. No wonder Jesus was angry when he encountered a man with leprosy. Here he also confronts a social class system that robbed this man of his human dignity and religious laws that robbed him of hope.

There are two details in this story that are especially important. The man with leprosy feels comfortable enough to go straight up to Jesus, to put his case, and ask for healing. We are told that Jesus touched him. Social and religious laws were being broken in this encounter. But Jesus' healing of the man isn't just about challenging social laws and taboos. Jesus tells the man to fulfill his religious obligations so that he can attend the temple again, and rejoin the community. Jesus was interested in converting all those he met to the higher laws of love and compassion.

We are challenged this Sunday to trust our anger. This is not only about fighting for our rights when we have been wronged, but more so, it's fighting for the dignity and rights of others. It can take many forms: taking the life of those yet to be born, or who are near natural death, fighting for future generations by calling for a just care of the earth. And it can be about standing up for those people in our home, parish, workplace, neighborhood, country, and world who are treated shamefully, excluded, derided, or declared unclean.

Why should we bother? Because this Sunday Christ comes to us, again, and declares that despite what we might think about ourselves, or what we have been told, there is nothing in us which cannot be healed or is beyond hope.

May this Eucharist give us the love and compassion of Christ to fight for others' dignity because of the dignity we have received from Him. May we trust our anger and pray that it be like that of Jesus, and so turn us into agents of change for a more just church and for a more just world.

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