

**The Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 15, 2009**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

I would like you to all join me singing or humming the theme song from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Ready? "It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day in this neighborhood....Thank you. And the song always ended: "please, won't you be my neighbor?"

Hold that thought—or that tune—as we re-visit today's gospel story.

Let's start with the story past. Leprosy—or whatever other skin diseases were included in that generic description—was considered highly contagious. The community was at stake. So the one afflicted with the disease was relegated to total isolation; they are cut off from participation in the life of the community, and are warned to keep their distance (witness today's reading from Leviticus). The one afflicted should at least have the common courtesy to always warn others: "unclean, unclean, coming through."

Enter the one whom John Maier called "the Marginal Jew," Jesus of Nazareth. He is approached by a leper, obviously one without common courtesy, who walks right up to him—in violation of the law—and says (in a more literal translation): "You can cure me—if you dare." This must have been high drama for those who had by this time, no doubt, retreated to the

sides of the path.

And Jesus then heightens the drama by reaching out and touching him. That too is against the law, and a very stupid thing to do. It makes Jesus now unclean himself and to be outcast by the community. But Mark's gospel tell us that before Jesus reached out and touched him, he was moved emotionally and deeply.

The word used in today's New American Bible translation is rendered "pity." That hardly captures the Greek word Mark uses. The word is *splanchnistheis*. It even sounds more gutsy in Greek than pity! And it is. *Splanchnistheis* is more than the ethereal "compassion" as well. It is more like gut-wrenching empathy. It is a gutsy word. Older translations once rendered it as "Jesus looked on him with warm indignation." Jesus was angry as well as feeling compassion. [This word, by the way, is the same one used when the Good Samaritan looks upon the man beaten and left for dead by the robbers on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem.]

This leper has been permanently outcast, thrown out of "the neighborhood," is no longer even considered a Jew. And Jesus is angry at such short sightedness; Jesus is using God's eyes. He touches the leper and becomes immediately unclean himself. Jesus' healing power makes he,

himself, sick, and an outcast. It is a fascinating drama!

But this is not a simple healing story; this is not a faith-healer or miracle worker taking pity, or doing magic. This is, as all Mark's healing stories are, the excruciating break-through into human history of God's kingdom, God's reign, a kingdom and reign in which there *are* no outcasts, there is *no one* ever in quarantine, in which *all* are members of one body. In Jesus, no one is ever outside "the neighborhood." It was a very radical idea; it still is.

No wonder, then, that Jesus himself becomes the ultimate outcast. He freely becomes sick himself, in Isaiah's words "bears our afflictions and weakness, and sin" and becomes in Rene Girard's words, the ultimate scapegoat.

That's the story past. Now for the story present. What about us? What about today? More puzzling! I have no idea how to ask us who *our* lepers are. But it is an important question for each one of us to ask today.

I have no idea where quarantines seem appropriate today either. Or where perhaps we should build fences and walls. Is it in slums? On our national borders? Is it in a few acres on the island of Cuba? Is it in a rainbow flag? Or by a glass ceiling? I don't know. I can't answer for you. As long as it's not in my neighborhood!

But just as all of us have, at least once, felt outcast ourselves, so too each of us still has an understandable need for quarantining someone else, for building a fence somewhere. It's just that we're not afraid of leprosy anymore. So of what, of whom, are we afraid? And, in a related question, what makes us angry? Warmly indignant enough to finally take a stand?

Most of us need to keep *our* neighborhoods tidy. And those neighborhoods can be physical, emotional, educational, cultural, racial, sexual, religious. The neighborhood needs to be kept neat! "Good fences make good neighbors." So goes the poem. But not, apparently the gospel!

So what do we do? I know St. Paul sounds somewhat arrogant again today, but listen to what he says so simply: "be imitators of me as I am of Christ." Neither Paul nor Christ could stand exclusion of any kind. They got angry. So where do we *splanchnistheis*, feel gut-wrenching compassion and get angry enough to do something about it? I don't know for us; I barely know for me. And it is scary.

Let me close using an image I have borrowed from Diane Bergant throughout this homily: "the neighborhood" of God's kingdom. Speaking of the openness toward all people that both Paul and Jesus demonstrate, she says so simply that others have already chosen to follow, have imitated them.

“Down through the ages there have been others who have continued this openness. St. Francis of Assisi kissed a man with leprosy; at the risk of their own lives, men and women welcomed runaway slaves into their homes; after September 11, 2001, Catholic high school girls wore head scarves in support of their Muslim friends.” She concludes, as I do with this morning’s real message: “The embrace of Christ is without bounds; the neighborhood is expanding.” Please, won’t you be my neighbor?