

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

There's a story in Luke's gospel about a Roman centurion who sends messengers to Jesus because his servant is ill. Jesus offers to go and heal the servant, but the centurion sends word, "I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof. Say but the word and my servant will be healed." Jesus is amazed at such faith, and when the centurion's messengers return to his home, they find that the servant has indeed been healed.

From this episode we are given to understand that Jesus' healing power could work even at a distance. All the more impressive is it, then, that when the leper approaches Jesus in today's gospel story, Jesus does not do anything to keep him at a distance, which would have taken away the issue of becoming unclean, even though he presumably could have healed him without making any physical contact.

Instead, the passage says, "Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, *touched him*, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean."

Jesus' compassion moved him to overcome fear of the consequences of coming into contact with the leper, an action that would render Jesus unclean and disqualify him from worship in the temple. In fact, the passage goes on to say that, in the aftermath of this healing event, Jesus was no longer able to go into a town openly but had to stay out in the country.

It's almost as if Jesus had not only healed the leper, but had traded places with him. Before it had been the leper who was forced to live outside the town, and now it was Jesus.

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What a happy coincidence—to have this Gospel on the same Sunday that we are introducing the theme of this year’s Lenten observance to foster a culture of encounter and to overcome the tendency to keep our distance from those whose background, social conditions, culture or upbringing are different from our own.

Today’s Gospel provides such a clear image of how Jesus went about his life—not allowing barriers of religious practice or even health concerns to get in the way of reaching out to someone in need. His compassion would not allow it.

I took a sneak peek at the calendar that comes with this year’s rice bowl: So many stories of people in so many different situations. And, as Pope Francis points out, each is available to us to be considered as neighbor.

Each situation has points of contact with our own—whether it has to do with a parent seeking a safe and stable place for her children to go to school, or a young person worried about having the right skills to find a good job, or a farmer who finds that the climate or lack of water seems to be working against the possibility of raising crops on the land that’s been in her family for generations.

A culture of encounter means, as a first step, to simply be willing to let people tell their story. It’s almost as if they are saying to us words similar to those the leper spoke to Jesus. The leper says to Jesus, “If you want, you can heal me.” The potential neighbor says, “If you want, you can listen to my story.” It may be that that’s

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all we will be able to do. But even that makes a difference.

I had a parishioner once who was homebound because of debilitating arthritis. Her hands and legs were so misshapen she couldn't even hold on to a walker. But one thing she could do was hold the telephone receiver.

She got a lot of calls from friends who wanted to check in on her. I witnessed several of those calls, and in many of those conversations the topic seemed to come around in one way or another to them telling her about their struggles and the suffering they were undergoing.

She told me that she thought that was because they had confidence that she knew what that meant. She had experienced a lot of suffering and so she could empathize with them, and she was willing to do so!

With listening we can show compassion. We can reach out and let the other know that we have heard them and that they are not alone, not on the outside looking in.

We don't know where the encounter will lead from there. That lies in the mind of God. But there's little doubt that opening ourselves to the lives of others will enrich us. It will open our hearts. And with open hearts it can't help but happen that God will find a way in and want to dwell there.

That's where it starts. Where it ends is in the fullness of the kingdom of God.