

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle C)  
October 12, 1986

Good morning. Today's liturgy invites a rather special thought at the beginning. And I reflect this, that wherever people gather, whether in celebration as here this morning, or in pain and sorrow, whether they come together in triumph or tragedy, no matter, there are always people in the midst, carrying heavy burdens. Many of them secret. Many of them deep. Fears, physical pain, human maladies. And the God who speaks in today's liturgy speaks dramatically of His power to heal human bodies. But He has more to say than that.

And wherever people gather, coming with their burdens and their pains and their hopes, they need to know in their hearts that, for many of those burdens, God's best answer is: You must continue to carry that burden, you must continue to struggle under that cross. But you need never carry one particular burden one moment longer, and that's the burden of sin and guilt. That burden you can lay down anytime. You are invited to lay down that one burden here, now, in this moment of mercy. And, if you do, then you'll be stronger and freer and fully able to carry those burdens we cannot be rid of.

Let's think on that and open ourselves for the incredible gift of God's forgiving love.

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A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Luke:

On His journey to Jerusalem, Jesus passed along the borders of Samaria and Galilee. As He was entering a village, ten lepers met Him. Keeping their distance, they raised their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us." When He saw them, He responded, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." On their way, they were cured.

One of them, realizing that he had been cured, came back praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself on his face at the feet of Jesus and spoke His praises. This man was a Samaritan.

Jesus took this occasion to say, "Were not all ten made whole? Where are the other nine? Was there no one to return and give thanks to God except this foreigner?" He said to the man, "Stand up and go your way. Your faith has been your salvation."

And this is the Gospel of the Lord.

It's been a few weeks now that we've all had Missalettes available to us to carry home. I'm just curious how many of you, before coming to the liturgy this morning, might have read these Scriptures and wondered at them a bit. You might say how many of you have perhaps a bit of a homily in your heart already. Any?

Well, if you had, you might have been able to preempt me, and I feel a pretty big homily coming, welling up inside of me this morning. And so as a kind of gesture of fairness and family, I'll tell you first what the homily is supposed to be saying. It's really simply supposed to say this: There is no doubt about it, God can cure all our human maladies and miseries, including every physical infirmity. He can. We believe that, right?

But His use of that power in God's plan is usually a preliminary, an intro, an ice-breaker, a teaser, to get our attention and get us beginning on the path of faith. And that's

how He prefers to use that power, generally.

In today's liturgy, two outsiders, non-believers, come and are touched by our God with His healing power, and, as a result, they are welcomed into the community of faith. And though the Scripture doesn't say it, you can be sure that both of those lepers saw a lot of pain and misery in the days and perhaps years that followed after it, and had to bear it. If we believe what I just said, if we really believe that, then, given the gift of faith and the promise of eternal life, which is in the second reading, then we can face anything. We can bear with all infirmity, because, as the Epistle says, "If we hold out to the end, we shall reign with Him."

Now there's the homily. Now come the flourishes, to put it into a kind of more immediate context. And I found myself, in a sense, identifying with these lepers, which is not meant to demean at all the tremendous pain and sense of exclusion they must have experienced. As many of us know, in those ancient times, for one thing, leprosy was a catch word. It referred to just about every illness that they didn't understand and know how to handle and might be contagious, as well as leprosy, the literal Hansen's Disease that we know of. And when people had these diseases, they were excluded from the community to protect the community. And it was a matter of law that, if they approached others, they had to have a bell around their necks and call out, speaking of themselves, "Unclean, unclean," so that the healthy people could appropriately run away.

Well, as I say, I got just a tiny little hint of that in my own life experience when, about ten or twelve years ago, I developed psoriasis – as in "the heartbreak of." And it was just a little irritation on one leg at first and I didn't go to a doctor immediately. But eventually I saw a lot of doctors, a number of skin experts, and each one had a more miraculous and more expensive ointment than the last one. And I tried them all. I went through one period where you get up in the morning and you cover yourself with this tarry substance, and then you have to sit there for ten minutes and let it soak in and dry, and don't touch anything or, like the tar baby, you'll make a mess of it. And then you get in the shower and you have to shower with tar soap and then after that with ordinary soap, and so on. I went the whole gamut.

And then one day, a friend of mine, who I think some doctors would refer to as one of those health nuts, said to me, "You ought to be taking Vitamin E." Well, I had tried everything else and paid for everything else, so I started taking whatever you'd call it, a thousand units of Vitamin E every day. That's the only psoriasis I have left, right there, that tiny little bit on my elbow. And that's been true for several years.

But when I had the psoriasis, I found out I really wasn't welcome at the beach, among other things. What a feeling when I arrived with my blotchy skin, and watched the looks on other people's faces and so on. And I used to wear long sleeves, because I knew that people found it distasteful to look at this. And so I had a little hint of what these lepers in the two Scripture readings felt like.

But maybe the more important reflection about that for me was my psoriasis was cured, and I don't remember ever saying a prayer that it would be. It was cured by Vitamin E, recommended through a friend. And that makes me think, in the context of today's liturgy, we ought to notice together that physical cures from human miseries and illnesses are still so mysterious and so unpredictable to us, it would be kind of dangerous, at least, to let our faith hang on whether or not God does these things in answer to our prayer, and trying to put the label of God's special intervention on unusual instances

of human recovery.

That He has that power we have no doubt. That He uses it when we ask Him, for our reasons, is a kind of shaky proposition, and, in fact, all we need do is look around and see ourselves aging and bending and having our vision weakened and our hearing get poorer, noticing these common conditions, if, in fact, God really wants to communicate at that level, to make us all young and beautiful every time we wear down a little, then He would be doing it. And it is so obvious that He isn't – if I could put it this way – into that sort of thing.

The Scripture tells us that for the foreigner, the stranger, the outsider, God was willing, through the Prophets and then in Jesus, to do miraculous healings to break the ice, to catch the attention, in order to be able to bring the unbeliever, the outsider, into the community of faith. But once in, we are supposed to be growing and developing in a healthy spirit, in such a way that our physical burdens and infirmities become not just a burden but a reminder of our frailty and a challenge to us to trust more and more in the Lord.

And one thing's for sure, and everybody who ever suffered can testify to this, the more one suffers, the more one understands and can be compassionate to the suffering and the pain of others.

Would that we could all be young again and get a clean bill of health in every respect every time we have suffered something, but it doesn't seem to be the way God works with us. He asks that we bear our infirmities so that, as the Scripture says, we may become perfect in our infirmities, and identify more readily with Jesus, who went the way of the Cross and got no last minute instant miracle to spare Him the pain and the humiliation of His passion and death.

These two outsiders became members of the faith community because they experienced physical healing. Who here has the right to ask for that initiation? Are we not, all of us gathered here, already initiated into the community of faith? Don't we already believe in the healing power of God? Are we not willing to be infirm, in a certain sense humanly crippled, so that our spirits may be given over not to pride and self-seeking, but to generosity and service?

We are not outsiders waiting to be converted. We are the converted who trust in the Lord. We are called to grow, day by day and week by week, in faith. And as you have heard me say so often, the homily is supposed to take an eternal truth – which is what I just recall, good for every age and every generation – but bring it into the context of the here and now where this community of God's people are living.

And so I draw your attention to a strange and sad irony that yesterday, in Tanzania, a country where I once lived, Mother Theresa, probably the world's most powerful symbol of loving and compassionate human healing for the broken and the dispossessed, was in an airplane accident. The plane crashed, and, we're tempted to say, miraculously, she was unhurt. But five well-wishers at the landing strip who had come to send her off on her healing mission, were killed by the airplane and its spinning propellers.

Couldn't God have prevented that happening? It is not His way to interfere in the accidents and the simple unfolding of natural events. But it is always His way, in times of tragedy, to bring supernatural strength and healing to the people who are caught by these events. And you can be sure that Mother Theresa will now be a yet more powerful healer, and people will be yet more sensitive to the fragility of life.

And part of the sad irony is, one of those killed in this accident was a man running

a clinic for lepers. New people will have to come forward to take the place of those who were lost. And in that, new healing will happen in the community.

We live now in a time of great fear and trepidation in the face of a new human misery and illness – AIDS. The very word scares us. I think that the Jesus who stands before us in today's liturgy asks us to look carefully at what's happening in the human community in this respect and examine how we as a people are dealing with this reality. In California, if they have their way, some people will persuade the electorate to make it a matter of law, in effect, to begin hanging bells again on people who are victims of a dread disease, and push them away from and out of what ought to be a compassionate and loving community.

We're all scared of it. But we who are Christian know that we are called to be healers for those who are hurting. And I find it quite interesting that only a few days ago, the Washington Post carried a powerful quote from a member of the gay community who has been very much involved in ministering to AIDS patients who are dying, and he said this, to approximate his words, he said, "The day will come when history will look back and observe that this was a new breakthrough in the human experience, that the people of a community" – meaning the gay community – "risked so much and reached out with such compassion to minister to their own."

A friend of mine went recently to another city to see her son, afflicted with AIDS and approaching death. And she called back to tell me that her own spirit was lifted because she came and found, beyond anything she could have hoped, friends and associates coming, gathering round, to give moral support and encouragement and strength, to suffer with – which, by the way, is the meaning of the word compassion, to suffer with, to experience with.

This dread disease, which we would love to have lifted from us as a society and from our sisters and brothers, terrible as it is, has become an opportunity for some people to learn the meaning and experience of compassion for the first time in their lives. Or at least at a new depth of human experience. And the victims are crying out to the larger community to say, "Will you push these lepers out and make us wear bells and condemn ourselves? Or will you, like Jesus, break through the leprosy and come with love and concern and tenderness to give the one healing that every person can give while we pray for the healing that only comes rarely in God's mysterious plan."

I want to close with that passage from the Epistle, but not without telling you – especially if you had searched for a homily this week in preparation – one of the experts I consult, one of the texts I always read, trying to prepare my own homily, made this observation – and he is a scholar far beyond anything I've ever achieved. He said: "And in this particular liturgy, you really can't make that middle reading fit the first and last ones, so you'd be well advised not to try." I respectfully and humbly disagree with him.

The first and last readings speak of the leper, the person in human suffering who needs the healing of Jesus, not now for better eyesight, for cure of skin disease, for freedom from limping with old age, but the healing of the heart and the spirit that Jesus always offers and we are meant to carry for him to our hurting neighbors. In the light of all that, the Epistle is a proclamation of why we have the courage to be healers. Oh, how I'd love it – at the 9:30 Mass, how I would have loved – to be able to walk over to beautiful Nandala Pradd(?), who always sits over there, whose hearing is

fading rapidly, who now, at the age of 93, faces the possibility of laser surgery on her eyes – how I'd love to be able to say, "Nan, here is the Christian community. Let me put my hands on you and we will pray and you will be healed, and you'll skip and dance at the end of Mass." Oh, I'd love to be able to do that.

And a lot of my brother, and perhaps sister, preachers imply that they can do that. I would have loved to be able to walk over to Dorothy Jackson at the 9:30 Mass and put my hand on her knee and say, "After all the pain and agony you've been going through for years, all of these unending operations, stand up now and you can walk free of pain, a cripple no longer." Oh, I'd love to be able to do that.

Those of you who are beginning to fear maybe the first hints of death, which comes inevitably to us all, those of you who are feeling the aching in your bones and who, even now as I speak, may be trying to catch a word here and there that escapes you, how I wish I could touch your ears and say, "Hear perfectly," touch your eyes and say, "20/20." How I'd love to be able to do that. I cannot and I will not, and I will not pretend to. And I'm chastened by the realization that there are other who preach the Gospel who invite people to come to the Christian assembly seeking this kind of healing, and I think that's very dangerous. Especially – especially – when some of those same preachers have the incredible arrogance, the incredible arrogance, to say that AIDS and other diseases are a curse that God visits on His people for their sins. Where did they find that God? Not in my Bible. Not in my Scripture.

Our Scripture, our faith, proclaims a God not who is merciful but IS mercy. And we proclaim salvation in Jesus who IS love and compassion for all His people. We cannot, we should not, I suspect, even try, in most cases, to invoke God's power to solve our physical maladies. When a parent bears the cross of a young child possibly in danger of death, God understands and so does the community if a heartfelt prayer goes up, "bring healing to my child." When a spouse feels death approaching for the beloved, that they would cry to God and say, "If it be your will, bring healing," God understands, and this is all very healthy and human.

But the main expression of our faith has to be a readiness, a willingness, to be infirm so that we can more effectively share the infirmities of our sisters and brothers, and we can and we must – all of us, every day – be bringing healing – healing and health – to broken hearts and bent and stooped spirits. That's what it's about. And it is in that second reading that it's all summed up for us. And so I share it with you again. Listen with fresh ears if you will to these words:

"You can depend on this. If we have died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If we hold out to the end, we shall also reign with Him. I bear with all of this for the sake of those whom God has chosen in order that they may obtain salvation found in Christ Jesus and, with it, eternal glory."

We can be bent. We can even be broken. We can be crippled 'til there's nothing left of us but a beating heart and a living spirit. But while that's there, we have the greatest gift of all. We have life, we have hope, and we have the freedom, even – and maybe especially – in our most infirm moments, we have the freedom and we have the power of Jesus to touch broken hearts and heal them, to reach out and embrace crushed spirits and make them whole again. If we hold out to the end, we shall reign with Him.

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