

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany - Year B
February 15, 2009
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We Love Because He First Loved Us “And Jesus Said To Him, I Do Choose.”

You know, normally I like to start off my sermons by saying....today's Gospel is about such and such, and I like to give you all a nice little key word or phrase which is to be the message of my sermon. However, today's Gospel had so many possible points that it made it almost impossible for me to continue with my normal practice. So I thought I might briefly go over some of those possible points.

For starters, I think all of us are typically left a little confused or bewildered at Jesus' stern request of the man once plagued with leprosy to not tell anyone and run directly to the temple priests. However, this sense of bewilderment is of course later topped by the actions of the cured man himself when he decides to disobey Jesus, and run and tell absolutely everyone he can. Part of this was one message I considered delivering today: Disobedient or not, could we not all use a little more of the enthusiasm, passion, and gratefulness that the cured man in today's Gospel had? I was thinking that perhaps he could be a kind of lesson to us about evangelism and the Great Commission. Then, at the beginning of today's Gospel, are the words of the leper as he requests cleansing from Jesus. The immense faith contained in those few words of the leper, "If you choose," made this another intriguing topic for today's sermon. I thought that perhaps this could be turned into a lesson about true Christian faith in God's providence.

Yet, in the end, what really stood out to me in today's Gospel reading was this lesson: We love only because God first loved us. We love only because God first loved us. How did I pull that message out of today's Gospel? From these three small words of Jesus, "I do choose."

You see, in the healing of the leper in today's Gospel, we are able to understand how healing or salvation takes place through Jesus' choosing to take upon Himself our own broken nature. In the case of today's Gospel lesson, it was leprosy. Leprosy in Biblical times was regarded as unclean and resulting from one's sinful behavior. Individuals with leprosy were untouchable and were cast out and isolated from the rest of society. What's more, anyone who touched a leper in biblical times was in turn treated in the same fashion and considered as lepers themselves. So, when we witness Jesus reaching out and touching a leper, it is a pretty big deal. Jesus, in today's Gospel, became a leper.

When Jesus reached out and touched the leper in order to heal him, He willingly became ceremonially unclean. Also, some other interesting things happened to Jesus and His situation after this miraculous healing took place. Scripture tells us that after He healed the leper, Jesus could no longer go into the towns and cities. Rather, from that time on, Jesus had to resort to staying out in the wilderness and the people had to come to him. Sounds like a leper to me. Now, scripture does not really seem to make a connection between these two events, however, it is certainly curious. Jesus, ceremonially unclean and in fact unable to enter the communities, was in effect transformed into a leper. In healing the leprous man, Jesus willingly took the man's disease upon Himself.

Ok, so how does this relate to us? We love because He first loved us. See, our relationship with Jesus day by day, and from the very beginning does not look very different from that of the leper's. Jesus heals us in much the same way that He healed the leprous man in today's Gospel. He reaches out and touches us, and willingly takes our disease upon Himself. Since His crucifixion and resurrection our relationship with God has been made possible only through Jesus' willingness to take the sin of the world upon Himself. Just as now, our individual forgiveness is made possible through His constant willingness to carry the burden of our mistakes and temptations.

Yet, the consequences of Christ's love do not stop there. See, it is not merely that we are able to be forgiven, healed, or saved because of Jesus' willingness to love us. Rather, it is as a direct result of His willingness that each one of us were baptized, are a part of the Body of Christ, and are here today. It is as a result of His willingness, His "I do choose," that we are compelled to come here today and participate in these holy sacraments of His Body and Blood of which we are about to partake. Through Christ's willingness to transform Himself for our sake, we too are transformed and made into something new.

We love only because He first loved us. Jesus willingly took the man's leprosy upon Himself and went off into the wilderness. Jesus willingly took our sin upon Himself and went off to heaven. Now, weekly, daily, constantly, we willingly return to Him here and in our own hearts, through participation in community and the Holy Sacraments. Not only for cleansing, but we come in order that we might receive He who was in the wilderness, He who was in heaven, into our own bodies and souls. That we, too, might now choose to go out into the world transforming others by reaching out and sharing the love that comes from Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior who continually transforms, and dwells within us. We love only because He first loved us.

"and Jesus said to him, I do choose"

Amen.