

Homily - 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Many people still remember the work of famed Scottish novelist and adventure writer Robert Louis Stevenson, especially his most famous writings - *Treasure Island* and the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, for instance - but far fewer remember a much briefer work, an open letter titled *Father Damien*.

In this letter, Stevenson used his ineffable prose to defend the legacy and life of the now-canonized Saint Damien of Molokai, the missionary priest who gave his life in service of the infamous Molokai leper colony in Hawaii.

Stevenson, in fact, had visited the colony himself, not too long after Damien's death. He described it, briefly, as "a pitiful place to visit and a hell to dwell in. It is not the fear of possible infection," he continued. "That seems a little thing when compared with the pain, the pity, and the disgust of the visitor's surroundings, and the atmosphere of affliction, disease, and physical disgrace in which he breathes."

"I do not think I am a man more than usually timid," he concluded, "but I never recall the days and nights I spent upon that island promontory (eight days and seven nights), without heartfelt thankfulness that I am somewhere else."

Fear. Isolation. Separation. From the time of Christ to that of Stevenson, barely more than a century ago, for so many unfortunate souls the marks of leprosy incurred the penalty of a life of permanent exile.

As we heard in the first reading's account from Levitical law, for the Jewish people this exile meant not only social ostracization, but even being completely cut off from the worshiping community, marked as permanently unclean as long as the signs of leprosy remained on their body.

For that leper who approached Jesus in search of healing, everything was at stake.

He seeks Christ with total trust and total openness:

“If you wish, you can make me clean.”

Like the leper, each of us is in need of healing - and it's a healing that is more than skin deep.

The healing that Christ promises, the healing that wipes away the marks of our own affliction, is freedom from the wounds of sin, and the brokenness within us where that sin has taken root.

Unlike the leper, however, we may not recognize the full extent to which sin affects our lives.

Our place in society, for starters, isn't typically one which depends on our holiness. Maybe the world would be a better place in some ways if it was.

And so it's easy to ignore when our spiritual woundedness begins to cause a very real separation and isolation - not necessarily in the everyday details of our lives, but in our souls.

We find ourselves slowly deadened, cut off from Christ himself, and from the graces he gives us through the community of his Body, the Church.

But he can heal this wound as well, if we are willing to ask for it.

The Church is only days away now from Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of the season of Lent and our time of preparation for the solemnities of the Holy Triduum.

At its heart, so much of Lent is about exactly this: healing and reconciliation.

As many of you know, one of the most important and effective ways to seek the Lord's healing grace is, of course, through the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the confession of our sins.

That forgiveness is the most important healing we can receive, because it opens our hearts once again to receive the Lord's grace, to hear his voice, and to be reconciled with his Church.

But that isn't the only means by which we are invited to be cleansed in this penitential time.

All three of what our tradition calls the "pillars" of Lent are important to this process, and each touches on a different dimension of our life that needs to be brought back into line with the Lord's will, and opened to his merciful love.

Prayer. Fasting. Almsgiving.

Each corresponding to the three great categories of temptation and attachment that afflict us throughout our lives: the temptation to pride and self-will, the attachments to worldly and bodily pleasures, and the disordered craving of greed for earthly goods and possessions.

To embrace the spirit of the season, we should embrace each pillar in a way that reflects our need for growth and healing from each of those attachments - or, to put it another way, we need to know where God is calling us to grow and approach Lent accordingly.

We can bring a simple question to prayer: What things in my life are getting in the way of my relationship with God?

They may be the same things we bring to confession, or they may be relatively simple, benign things.

Time wasted on superficial activities or media when we know our prayer life is shallow or completely neglected.

Money and energy spent frivolously on things that don't matter when we have done nothing to serve our neighbor or the needs of the Church.

Going from day to day with barely a thought for the Lord or his will, or how he might be calling us to grow in love and virtue.

If there's one good rule to keep in mind for a fruitful Lent - if, like the leper who turned to Christ in hope and desperation, you want to experience his healing mercy - then don't worry about what anyone else is doing.

Pray about where God is leading you. Ask that question: if Jesus Christ were truly at the center of your life, what would change?

This is the season to enter fully into that process, and let the Lord cleanse your heart, your mind, and your will.

Most of all, remember that we aren't in this alone. The whole Church is walking with us on that journey, and Christ promises to strengthen us for this time with the graces of his own Body and Blood, the purifying forgiveness of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and the movement of his own Holy Spirit, given to us in our baptism.

Trust him. Turn to him with all humility - "Lord, if you wish you can make me clean."

If he wishes, we will be reconciled, raised up with him to the heights of holiness.

And know that he does will it. And in time, with his love, we will be made clean.