

Homily for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time –B February 12, 2006

*Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46 1 Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1 Mark 1:40-45*

Scabs, pustules, blotches and sores - nasty things indeed!

But the key to understanding today's scripture is not medical or scientific – it is sociological.

These scriptures are not so much about leprosy or disease or illness as much as they are about boundaries:

who's in, who's out?

and who decides who's in and who's out?

Perhaps the most telling line in today's readings is the last verse in the first lesson:

*“(The leper) shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp...*

Who's in, who's out and who decides who's in and who's out?

The boundary at work in today's scripture has to do with bodily fluids:

with those nasty “scabs, pustules, blotches and sores...”

Primitive peoples reasoned that bodily fluids belonged inside the body. Therefore, emissions from the body

were considered disordered and therefore unclean.

The Israelites weren't afraid of “catching” leprosy.

Their understanding of germs and infection and contagion was non-existent.

The issue here is boundaries, not hygiene.

Add to this that these ancient peoples believed that disease was often caused by the sick person's sinfulness –

and you have a situation where the afflicted person is to be avoided at all costs

and is literally thrown out of town, to dwell outside the camp, to protect the community

`-not from germs or disease- but from guilt by association with the sick person.

Fortunately, we are sophisticated enough not to set boundaries by such primitive and unenlightened standards.

But that doesn't mean that we are beyond setting boundaries of our own

by which we separate “them” from “us”

disdaining “them” as outside the camp of “us.”

Our camp boundaries might be set in terms of RED states and BLUE states -

along with all the nasty political rhetoric of talk shows and blogs that divides “them” from “us.”

The sweeping, negative generalizations made about Muslims - on the one hand –

and the vilification of the Bush administration - on the other –  
set boundaries on tolerance, acceptance, civil discourse and legitimate debate.

Yankee fans don't have to live in Boston very long  
before discovering that they are banished to live "outside the camp"  
and that, as the bumper stickers say, "Yankees - - - -!"  
Such rivalry can be robust until it becomes riotous - and people get hurt.

Ask some Boston Catholics what they think of bishops and you'll discover another group  
classed as unclean,  
banished beyond the demands of Christian respect and charity.

The Church itself, of late, has been re-tuning its focus  
on those it considers disordered and outside our communion,  
in a sad regression to a more primitive theology and practice of "insider-outsider"  
thinking.

And for a classic and local example of who's inside and who's outside the camp,  
tap the sad and silly myths of Concordians and West Concordians,  
some of whom may be thinking right now,  
"Well, Father, you've only lived here 11 years – you just don't know."

Well, here's something I do know.

The lesson of the gospel today is simple:

- Jesus crossed a boundary when he stopped and SPOKE to the leper who came to him
- Jesus crossed a boundary when he stretched out his arm and TOUCHED the diseased man
- Jesus sent him to the priest: a sure sign that the man was now INSIDE the camp

*(Remember: it was the priest in the first lesson who declared the leper unclean and it is now the priest who validates his return to the community.)*

And after crossing the boundary and curing the leper, what did Jesus then do?  
Today's gospel answers that question; "He remained OUTSIDE in DESERTED  
places..."

Jesus is the one who puts himself outside the camp  
precisely to draw to himself all those who have been marginalized  
by the prejudice, the hatred, the jealousy, the superstition and the judgment of  
others.

Jesus is the ultimate boundary breaker!

He crossed the boundary of divinity by sharing our humanity.

And he crossed the boundary of heaven by leaving us the eucharist so that we might have  
in this life

a taste of salvation, a sip of peace,  
before crossing the boundary of death ourselves.

Come to his table then, to the table where he welcomes all who come to him  
that he might stretch out his hand and touch us  
in the gift of his body broken for us, and his blood, poured out for us.

He wants nothing more than to cross the boundaries of our hearts.