

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 15, 2009

Lev. 13:1-2, 44-46 Ps. 32:1-2, 5, 11 1Cor. 10:31-11:1 Mk 1:40-45

S. Noreen Coleman, OP

“Reach out and touch someone.” Remember this AT&T slogan, urging us to contact our loved ones through its long distance telephone service? Songwriters and TV advertisers had a field day with this novelty line, helping the company impress customers that its service was an indispensable element of everyday life. That was more than a generation before all the new “essentials” for twenty-first century living hit us—fax, pager, cell phone, email, text messaging, blogging, myspace and the latest (at this writing, at least) Facebook. How did we ever manage to communicate with anyone without these technological “wonders”?

The leper in today’s Gospel gives a different twist to the slogan. His catch line appears to be *“Reach out and be touched”* first, and then be empowered to *“Reach out and touch someone else.”* He is well aware that after being declared officially unclean, he is to remain ostracized from the community. But he is willing to take the risk and step over the ritual boundaries, bypassing the explicit regulations described in today’s first reading.

Drawing near to Jesus, the leper kneels down in a gesture of *humility*, of felt unworthiness. Then, in words that sound almost challenging, yet filled with deep *faith*, he asks outright for a cure. Jesus knows that by daring to touch a leper he risks being declared unclean and becoming an outcast himself. However, moved with compassion, he too rises above the law and, with a touch, restores the man’s health and returns him whole to the community.

Although Jesus has admonished the leper to “tell no one anything,” he suddenly senses his empowerment to “publicize the whole matter.” Nothing, no one, not even Jesus, can squelch his excitement. He becomes a visible witness, an apostle, a preacher of the good and wonderful news. Having been touched himself he can now *“reach out and touch someone else.”* And does he ever! The crowds come flocking to Jesus!

How do we imitate the central figures in today’s scenario? Are we willing to be touched with the love, compassion and mercy of Jesus as we meet with him in our quiet moments of prayer? Do we approach him with the two indispensable requisites: profound *humility* and unshakeable *faith*? Thankfully, we have a direct and immediate line of communication and don’t need to muddle through myriad technological devices to contact him.

Can we realize our empowerment to *“reach out and touch”* today’s untouchables as readily and as frequently as Jesus in his day? They are easily recognizable: the scruffy homeless one, the hardened criminal, the incorrigible child, the terminally ill AIDS patient, a person who is disfigured, depressed or mentally slow. The list can be endless. Do we shy away from them, or do we risk treating them with the same healing love we ourselves have experienced? Can we proclaim to everyone the Good News of Jesus as excitedly and passionately as today’s leper?