

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible at the center of your group, and light a candle beside it. Pray the discipleship litany below and add to it people who minister to you in ordinary, neighborly, but significant ways.

LEADER: John the Baptist, witness of the messiah's coming.

ALL: Be with us now.

- Mary, ponderer of the Word
- Andrew, seeker and finder of the Lamb
- Simon, fisher of people
- James and John, ready followers of Jesus
- Peter's mother-in-law, woman who serves
- Holy leper, preacher of good news

Add people who minister to you.

A small plane flew 12 of us from Oahu to Molokai, the Hawaiian island where people with Hansen's disease lived out their days in the 1800s. Death haunts the three-square mile Kalaupapa Peninsula. Some 8,000 people with Hansen's disease lived and died there. Most are buried in the cemetery but some where their bodies were left. With the sea on three sides and a 2,000 foot cliff on the fourth, the flat peninsula made a perfect prison.

February 14, 2021, 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Vol. 30, No. 20

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Today we know that 95% of us have a gene that prevents us from contracting Hansen's disease and that medicine can cure it in weeks. In the 1800s, so many native Hawaiians contracted the disease that officials separated anyone with the slightest sign of the disease from their families and shipped them to Molokai. Doctors considered the disease contagious and untreatable.

A sturdy and steady Belgium farm boy, Father Damien De Veuster, worked for nine years on the big island of Hawaii, learned the Hawaiian language, and became a priest of the people. He volunteered to become the pastor of St. Philomena's Church on Molokai in 1873 and served the people for 16 years until he died of leprosy at 49.

Damien, now St. Damien, helped the people who had no reason to live or care for one another to recover their human dignity.

When the King and Queen of Hawaii asked for sisters to

nurse people with leprosy, Mother Marianne Cope assembled her Franciscan community in Syracuse and announced that she wanted to go to Hawaii and wasn't afraid of any disease. Thirty-five sisters volunteered to go with her; she chose six.

The sisters traveled by train from New York to California and by boat to Honolulu, where they immediately took charge of the hospital for people who might have leprosy. When Father Damien got leprosy, Mother Marianne and another sister went to live on Molokai. They opened a house for women and girls on the peninsula.

In nursing hundreds of the sick, none of the sisters got leprosy because they washed their hands and followed sanitary procedures. Today the whole Church recognizes what people in Hawaii have long known—both Mother Marianne and Father Damien are saints. The sisters still work in Hawaii.

- How have you heard the term leper used?



Sunday Readings: Leviticus 13.1-2, 44-46
1 Corinthians 10.31-11.1 Mark 1.40-45



Father Damien



Mother Marianne Cope



GOSPEL

Jesus cleanses a leper.

NARRATOR: A leper came to Jesus, imploring him urgently and kneeling as he spoke.

LEPER: If you will, you can make me clean.

NARRATOR: Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the man.

JESUS: I will. Be made clean.

NARRATOR: Immediately the leprosy left him. After a stern warning, Jesus immediately sent the man away.

JESUS: See that you say nothing to anyone. Go, show yourself to the priest and make the offering for your cleansing which Moses prescribed as a testimony to them.

NARRATOR: The man went out and began to proclaim the whole matter freely and spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly. He stayed in desert places; yet people kept coming to him from all sides.

Mark 1.40-45



voices of those left out who call us to widen our tents and tables.

In asking for justice and equality, people express their dignity as human beings made in God's image and likeness. They give voice to God's purpose for us all—wholeness, a community of love on earth that mirrors the divine community of love that is God.

- What boundaries among people exist in your neighborhood or parish?
- With whom might you build a bridge from isolation to participation in economic life, parish life, or family life?
- Which boundaries do you consider vital to community well-being?

What is the power of Jesus' touch?

The opening of Sunday's gospel story dramatizes the suffering of a leper in Jesus' time. A leper implores Jesus' help, begs for it, kneels in hope. The story provides us no ugly details of the man's appearance, but rather stresses how much he wants to be healed and how certain he is that Jesus can heal him. The leper brings to his encounter with Jesus an attitude of profound need and expectant hope.

Lepers in Jesus' time and until our century lived their lives apart from other people. As the law cited in Sunday's first reading prescribes, lepers must live "outside the camp." Probably out of caution people lumped many skin conditions in with leprosy.

Interestingly, leprosy, like many other grounds for making

people outsiders, shows visibly on the body. Race, gender, and age also show in our bodies. Poverty usually shows, too, in missing teeth and listless faces. On the basis of body appearance, communities establish boundaries between inside and outside.

Race and poverty can put people on the other side of the tracks. Age can isolate people in their homes apart from the life of the community. Gender stereotypes can impede both men and women from developing whole selves.

The voices of the poor and powerless, like the leper's voice, call for inclusion in society. In Israel's earliest traditions, it is the voices of slaves crying out against their masters that God hears and sends Moses to free. It is the

In Sunday's gospel, an outsider's plea for healing and inclusion calls Jesus to cross a boundary inscribed in Israel's law. The leper so moves Jesus with pity that he stretches out his hand, touches, and heals the man. Jesus does what the law warns against. He makes physical contact with the leper. His touch expresses his will for this sufferer's wholeness.

Jesus' act demonstrates a move we cannot make. We cannot will to heal and make it so. We can, however, feel and walk with people

who suffer illness or oppressive situations. We can attempt to hear their experience of life.

Connecting with others is vital to health, especially for people battling mental illness who want to withdraw and choose isolation rather than struggle with their problem. Being heard can heal isolation. Helping new immigrants learn English and continue their education opens doors to participating in our society. Walking with people can build bridges across the invisible boundaries or even erase the boundaries.

● **What is your experience of walking with people to build bridges between insiders and outsiders?**

● **Why do you think Jesus touches the leper rather than just speak to him? When has touch healed you?**

The healed leper cannot keep the good news of his new wholeness secret as Jesus asks but begins to “spread the word.” He is one of four people in Mark’s gospel who tell the good news rather than keep it secret. All

are anonymous. All need and receive healing or exorcism.

The man whom Jesus frees of a legion of demons in Mark 5 wants to follow Jesus but Jesus sends him to his own people. The man begins “to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him” (5.20). The woman who touches Jesus’ garment and is healed of a 12-year flow of blood tells the truth of what happened to her in the midst of a crowd (5.33).

The fourth anonymous missionary in Mark’s gospel is a deaf mute whom Jesus gives hearing and speech. The more Jesus orders him not to tell about his healing, the more zealously he proclaims it (7.36).

These four people live as outsiders before their healings. The leper had to live outside the camp. The man with demons lived in a cemetery, an unclean place that the law demands must be located outside the city. The woman with the hemorrhage was unclean and unable to enter the temple as long as she



had the flow of blood. The deaf mute lived without being able to speak to anyone. Their healings integrate each into the community; their healings become good news they cannot contain.

The anonymous disciples of the early Christian communities provide us with role models. They call us to be like them, to minister among our own and speak the good news of all God does in our lives.

● **What anonymous Christians have been role models to you?**

DO SOMETHING



- Who in your area visits men and women in prison? What groups try to connect parents in prison and their children? Visit getonthebus.us to learn about a California program for uniting children with mothers and fathers in prison. Start or participate in a program such as this, or with groups that visit or do retreat work with inmates.
- Girls who bear children very young and develop fistulas get treated like lepers. Visit Girls Not Brides, a global partnership to end child marriage.

Leprosy is isolating.

For 116 verses in Leviticus, chapters 13 and 14, the law makes prescriptions about how to protect the community from the danger of contagious skin diseases. Thirty-two of the verses describe the ritual for cleansing in which a priest must verify that the person is free of skin sores. The person must live in the open for seven days, then totally shave his or her body and wash. The law requires the cleansed person to offer lambs, grain, and oil on the eighth day.

All of these legal details tell us leprosy was a terrifying danger that demanded the community separate the afflicted person from the healthy. However, the rites of the cleansing tell that diseases other than leprosy, which was incurable, must have been included under the category.

Leprosy makes outsiders of its sufferers. In some sense, every disease has this effect. One experiences illness alone in one's own body, in one's self.

HIV/AIDS caused fear and isolation when it began. It had no cure and people weren't sure how it was passed on. Now retroviral drugs make living with HIV possible if drugs are available. AIDS has orphaned millions of children in Africa who need families and education.

Smell rather than appearance forces child brides apart when pregnancy and delivery tear their bodies and leave them leaking urine and feces. Fistulas make sufferers unwanted in their homes and communities. Surgery can correct fistulas but in many African countries it is not readily available.

Lepers must live apart.

The Holy One said to Moses and Aaron, "When someone has on the skin of his or her body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it appears to be the sore of leprosy, this person shall be brought to Aaron, the priest, or to one of the priests among his descendants.

"Persons who are leprous and unclean, the priest shall declare unclean by reason of the sores on their heads. The person who has the sores of leprosy shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his or her head be disheveled. The person must cover his or her upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean!' The person remains unclean as long as the sores are on the body; for the person is unclean. He or she must live apart in a dwelling outside the camp."

Leviticus 13.1-2,44-46

- What have you experienced that made you feel isolated or that put you outside the camp for a while?
- How have you handled or overcome the isolation that illness can create for a family member? Or, for caregivers?

PRAY

Conclude your reflection by praying or singing the Prayer of St. Francis.

**Lord, make me
an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred,
let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy**

**Grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled
as to console;
to be understood
as to understand;
to be loved as to love.**

**For it is in giving
that we receive;
it is in pardoning
that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that
we are born to eternal
life.**



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, the editor of SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.

**Visit our website—
goodgroundpress.com**

- to pray the daily prayer
- to make an online retreat
- to place an order
- to find out what's new at

Good Ground Press

**Or call 800-232-5533.
Thank you.**