

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2016
Mark 1.40-45

At this time thirty years ago, I was serving in New York City as a companion to persons affected by HIV-AIDS. At the time, the disease was of epidemic proportions, and across the country hundreds died each week. Fear of contagion and the shame of being associated with the so called *gay disease* caused many to abandon their afflicted family members and friends. Although my official role was that of *spiritual* companion, clients called on me to assist them in any number of ways.

Karposi sarcoma is a cancer, which produces purplish lesions on the skin. In many cases, its appearance caused an HIV-AIDS patient to abandon hope. One afternoon, I was accompanying a young man, arm in arm, to a doctor's appointment, when we encountered another young man, whose face was blotched with a number of lesions. My friend, an accomplished athlete proud of his good looks, bolted and grabbed my arm. "Jim, if that happens to me, I don't want to live." Within two weeks, lesions appeared on his face, and he gave up hope.

It's quite possible that a number in this church today underwent similar experiences with family members or friends *back in the day*, when HIV-AIDS took its toll quickly and family and friends felt obligated to equivocate about the cause of death and to deny the reality of that *love that dare not speak its name* (Lord Alfred Douglas, *Two Loves*, 1854).

Moreover, you will recall the public outcries to isolate, ostracize, and even abandon HIV-AIDS population. Yet today, in any number of settings, even in this church we rub shoulders with survivors of HIV-AIDS. Magic Johnson has lived for twenty-six years since being diagnosed.

In the time of Jesus, teenage zits and acne, as well as eczema made one a leper and outcast.

Aside from the fact that I no longer have the energy to execute the convictions, which impelled me at an earlier age, with age I'm increasingly shocked at the legion of petty excuses, which we as a society and as individuals conjure up, in order to judge and distance ourselves from others. They are not only ordinary but viral and lethal.

As a society and as individuals, we stigmatize and shun the homeless, the heavily inked, those who have a *gangsta* look, those who don't dress in western dress or those we suspect to be *undocumented*, etc., etc., etc. We imagine and suspect our teens and young

adults of being up to all manner of mischief and bad behavior, but as long as they keep their grades up, we look the other way.

Recently, I listened to someone describe the joy of the leper at being cured. “Imagine the leper seeing his skin dazzlingly white,” he said. “Say what?” I almost gasped. We’re talking about the time of Jesus, and even today only a minority of the human population is white, and you’re telling me the brother or sister next to me should rejoice at his/her skin being made white as snow. I don’t think so.

I had planned to reflect on the lepers we make of ourselves, the self-loathing resulting from what we were taught and how we were treated even in infancy, or the sin we regard as unforgiveable, which, in spite of our accomplishments and our bringing honor to our families, often plague us even into our later years. Unfortunately, time does not permit and I must leave that for another time.

Allow me to conclude with the lyrics of a song from Rogers’ and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific*:

“You've got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You've got to be taught
From year to year,
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes [as are mine] are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a different shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.
You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!”

Jesus removes all alienation: from without and from within.