

Last Sunday after Epiphany
February 15, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 1:40-45

Disease is often the beginning of alienation from others and thus the cause of the loneliness that follows. Under the Jewish law, for the sake of the health of the community, this alienation from others was legislated. We see in our Old Testament lesson that those who had leprosy were required to declare that they were unclean and live outside the camp. The verse even says the sick person must live alone.

The miracle that Jesus performed in today's Gospel involved the cleansing of a leper. The fact that the former leper has been restored to the community can be seen in the spreading of Jesus' fame. The man who once had to live alone was then able to speak openly with so many people that Jesus could not enter a town, but had to remain in the country where people came to Him. The healing of the leper thus represented the restoration of community for the sick, the end of his alienation from society and, therefore, the end of his loneliness.

Since the very beginning of the Catholic Church, Christians have distinguished themselves by how they relate to the sick. Whereas the standard Roman reaction in times of the plague was to flee the cities in favor of the safety of the country, the Christians stood out because they remained behind to care for those who were ill. The pagans were abandoned by those they loved the most, but the Christian community remained intact because of Jesus' command that we visit the sick in their affliction, remembering his admonition on the Judgment Day in Matthew 25.

There were several effects as a result of the Christians' observing of this corporal work of mercy. First, a lot of Christians died. The deliberate choice to remain with the sick in times of plague meant that disproportionate numbers of Christians contracted the disease. St. Charles Borromeo caught the plague because he remained behind to give the dying their Last Rites. He recovered, but died young a few years later. St. Aloysius Gonzaga died at age twenty-three because, as a seminarian not yet ordained to the priesthood, he stayed with the sick and became a victim of the plague. These are just two famous examples of this phenomenon, but it has occurred innumerable times since the founding of the Church. Disease claims the sick and also those who care for them.

This dying while caring for the sick is a form of martyrdom. It shows that Christians are willing to do what is right without fear, to lay their lives down for the Lord in confidence that He will raise them up, as surely as He Himself rose from the dead. This love, the witness of such selfless love, caused the second effect associated with Christian solidarity with the sick. Despite the fact that the Church lost so many faithful disciples whenever the plague hit, the Church grew because such boundless love is very attractive. This is yet another manifestation of Jesus' promise, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." The sight of so many Christians bearing their crosses for the sake of those they loved prompted the conversion of pagans who longed for such love.

One of the fruits of such love is the joy exhibited by those to whom the Church ministers. Those homebound who receive visitors generally possess a happier disposition than those who are always alone because they have no family or their families have abandoned them. This joy is derived, we must point out here, not merely because visitors show the sick that they are loved. The visits also give the sick the opportunity to love others. Yes, even when alone, we can offer up prayers for those we love, but true love extends beyond the purely spiritual. We who are embodied spirits can love most fully when we have people in the flesh to love. And so it is with the sick: when we visit them, we give them the opportunity to love us as surely as we are loving them. Since joy is derived from true love, we must give the sick such opportunities if their joy is to be full.

Add to this the reality that true love is always expressed in the context of community. If we look at the God who is love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we see in the Trinity among the persons an exchange of themselves, the mutual outpouring from which proceeds life. This is the ultimate fruit of visiting those whose illness has separated them from the society of which they have been a part. In maintaining that bond, that relationship expressed over many years, the sick are able to offer the gifts that give life; and those who minister to them do the same.

Love, joy, and life. All of these gifts commend themselves in such a way that visiting the sick is an absolute necessity for those of us trying our best to live out the Faith. Our visits will not necessarily bring about a physical healing. Most times, when a person recovers, we will not know one way or the other what role our visit played. We must also expect that our visit may not have the desired spiritual effect, either. Remember that the leper, immediately upon being healed, rushed out to disobey Jesus' commandment that he remain silent about his healing other than to show himself to the priest. Our love, in other words, may not be reciprocated. And our attempts to forge communion could mean in the end that community is more difficult to maintain. In any case, we can't know until we try.

Therefore, as we approach the holy season of Lent, we would do well to observe this time of the Church year with more than a fast. Certainly, give up something that will enable you to make reparation for sin or avoid the near occasion of sin. But we should also add to our devotion something we may have neglected to do as often as we should. Visiting the sick or the homebound is one way we can demonstrate our love for others while at the same time giving others the opportunity to love us. The restoration of community that results will be a prefiguration of our communion with one another for all eternity before the Throne of Grace.