

**Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – February 11, 2018**  
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Since the beginning of human existence, people have gathered together in groups – families, villages and towns, social and political organizations. In order for such groups to survive, it seems, there must be those who belong, and those who do not. The first recorded outcast was Cain. God banished him after he murdered his brother. Since the time of Cain, billions of people have found acceptance within one group or another – while others have been driven away, left out, abandoned. Imagine the experience of being picked last on the playground during recess, multiplied by a thousand. Imagine the experience of sitting alone in a high school cafeteria, multiplied by ten thousand. That sense of disrespect, of exclusion, of rejection, weighs on a person. Often, they see themselves as less valuable than others, as unworthy, as unloved.

We hear in today's readings about the scourge of leprosy – a disease so disfiguring that those who contracted it were absolute outcasts. Our first reading came from the book of Leviticus – among the most ancient of the texts in the Hebrew Scriptures. When someone was thought to have leprosy, the Israelites were instructed to bring that person to Aaron. As high priest, it was Aaron who was to make the declaration that the person was unclean. There began that person's exile – his clothing, his appearance, his separation from the community were to declare that person unsafe, unclean. That separation from the world continued even into the Nineteenth Century. St. Damian of Molokai and St. Marianne Cope ministered to the leper colony in present day Hawaii. More than a disease, leprosy instilled fear in the human heart. It was a disease that was so feared that those who contracted it were banished from human society.

It was against this background that Jesus encountered the leper who knelt before him in today's gospel passage. His request was simple. He wanted to be made clean. He wasn't just asking to be cured of leprosy – to have his face or his hands freed from the sores of the disease. In asking to be made clean, he wanted to be restored to the human family, to society. He wanted to wear regular clothes again, to be able to live with his family again, to be able to approach people without having to shout out "Unclean, unclean!" The leper wanted to belong again. And as he did in last week's gospel, Jesus offers the leper his healing touch. Now if you think that touching Simon's mother-in-law, a woman with a fever who was not his wife, if you think that touch was scandalous – imagine this one. For at least the previous twelve centuries, lepers had been thought of as unclean, the disease as incurable. One who came near a leper, much less touched one, was himself unclean. When Jesus touched that leper, he risked being ostracized by

everyone in Galilee. Jesus could have been an outcast – but he was a healer instead.

Each of us has, from time to time, felt the exclusion of physical illness – people who did not want to come close to us because of our cough or our fever. Each of us has also felt excluded by the “in” crowd because we were not sufficiently popular, or sufficiently good-looking, or sufficiently wealthy, or sufficiently fluent in the predominant language, or for many other reasons. More than that, each of us has, from time to time, internalized that feeling of exclusion. Even if others were willing to accept us, we put up walls around ourselves to protect us from their probable rejection. They won’t accept me, we tell ourselves, so I won’t even reach out, won’t say hello. I’ve been rejected too many times – I’ll just spare myself the humiliation.

As damaging as that internalized rejection is to developing and maintaining healthy relationships with others – it can be fatal if we internalize our imagined rejection by God. I am such a sinner, so inadequate, so lost – we tell ourselves – that God could not possibly love me, could not possibly forgive me, could not possibly do anything but reject me. If we hear that internal dialogue enough, we begin to believe it. And then we act on it. If we’re going to be abandoned and rejected by God, we tell ourselves, we’ll just reject him first. If I am going to be unlovable, then I might as well do what it takes to be hated. If I am going to be unforgivable, then I might as well earn the title.

Today’s gospel reminds us that no one – not the outcast, not the forgotten, not even the leper – is rejected by God. God considers no one unforgivable. God considers no one unlovable. We can run and hide and bury ourselves in a quagmire of sin – but nothing can separate us from the love of God. That message rings loudly throughout our readings today. That message rings loudly throughout the season of Lent that we will begin this Wednesday. God always welcomes us home, binds our wounds, heals and strengthens us. He welcomes us when we deserve his love and forgiveness. And he welcomes us even more when we do not deserve it. He forgives what you and I would consider unforgivable. He heals what you and I would consider incurable. He accepts us even when we do not accept ourselves, especially when we do not accept ourselves. Take time this Lent to consider just for a moment – maybe I am not a lost cause. Maybe I am not beyond hope. Because God accepts, and forgives, and loves us all.