

Homily for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Times

February 10-11, 2018

Readings: Leviticus 13: 1-2, 44-46; 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1; Mark 1: 40-45

Preacher: Christine Kvam

How humiliating. That was my first thought when I looked at this Sunday's Hebrew Scripture reading from Leviticus. To have to shout, "Unclean!" and live outside the community because of something out of your control...how humiliating.

As often happens, when you have an idea on your mind, you start to notice it popping up in other places. This concept of humility presented itself again when a colleague shared an anecdote about a past practice of women religious. Years ago, when a member of the community was offered a correction, she was to respond, "thank you for the humiliation, sister."

Naturally that led me to think about humiliation in a different way—how is humiliation something for which we could be grateful? The answer is really in the question. The root of humiliation is *humble*. While humiliation has such a negative connotation in our culture, its foundation—humility—is actually a virtue. And once again, because this was on my mind, it popped up elsewhere. I noticed that a different coworker has a small, simple sign posted in his office that states, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less."

This connects so perfectly to that dictate from Leviticus. The purpose of the humiliating act of announcing oneself as "unclean" was to protect others in the community from a contagious affliction. Thus the unfortunate victims of leprosy who followed this law demonstrated a true and admirable humility in protecting others at the expense of their own pride.

While one would hope that this kind of humiliation would no longer be necessary in our modern society, we saw a similar heartbreaking situation when we turned on the news a couple weeks ago and learned about the appalling acts of sexual abuse against dozens of our country's talented young female gymnasts. More than 160 of these courageous women endured not only the horror of the abuse itself, but also the humiliation of having to publicly proclaim it (sometimes over and over again) until someone believed them and held their abuser accountable. I stand in awe of the strength of these women who had the tenacity to put aside their own discomfort in recounting their most painful experiences in order to protect

others from being violated and to make our society better by demanding justice and declaring that this behavior cannot be tolerated.

The troubling parallel between the lepers of the Ancient Near East and 21st century United States gymnasts is clear. What's a bit harder to see is where the Good News can be found in this. So we turn to the Gospel where we see Jesus turn humiliation into healing—clearly in this account of his cure of the leper, but also more broadly in the whole Paschal Mystery. Jesus endured humiliating torture. As the Christ hymn in Philippians poetically states, “he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” And we know well that this is not the end of the story. Jesus’ resurrection boldly affirms that from humiliation new life can shine forth.

Yet we cannot rest content knowing that God makes all things new in the fullness of time. As Mark’s Gospel repeatedly shows us, Jesus calls us to discipleship—the active, faithful, hard work of building God’s kingdom in the here and now. So while we attempt to think of ourselves less and embody the courageous humility of the leper and the gymnasts when necessary, we must also tirelessly strive to build a society where people are no longer victimized and shamed. A society where all members follow Jesus’ example of reaching out to and raising up the vulnerable so that no one has to declare themselves victims and all can, as Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, “do everything for the glory of God.”