

6th Sunday OT – (Year B) – February 11, 2018

LV 13:1-2, 44-46; PS 32:1-2, 5, 11; 1 COR 10:31–11:1; MK 1:40-45

It's a fact of human nature that most people are more concerned with seeking *comfort* than they are with adhering to the **truth**.

This was certainly the case in Jesus' time, when people would boldly offer **to follow Jesus wherever he went** (cf. Mt. 8:20)...**until** he told them the **actual cost** of doing so. Almost instantly, they would make **excuses** and **return** to their **old ways**, rather than **follow** him.

Truth always **demand**s something of us. Living according to the truth always **costs** something.

Preferring comfort to truth is certainly not a **new** phenomenon, though it does seem more *extreme* these days. Yet, until it's pointed out, most people can't see how this "**preferential option for comfort**" dominates their own lives.

Here's an **illustration**:

Suppose there's a **Senator** has always held marriage to be an exclusive relationship between one man and one woman, not **only** on religious grounds, but *especially* because every civilization in history *until the last 15-20 years or so* has *intuited* this truth.

Now, suppose the Senator's son or daughter "**comes out**" as **homosexual**. The politician does a public **about-face** on marriage, and now supports its redefinition as a matter of "**equality**". When pressed to explain how his or her position "evolved" the Senator says, "**Well, I love my son—(or "I love my daughter)—so I have to support him—(or her).**" The secular media proclaims the Senator a **champion of equality** whose parental love **evolved beyond hateful religious dogma**.

But with a little common sense, we can spot an insidious **secular heresy** at the very heart of this so-called "**evolved**" position.

What do we mean by "**secular heresy**", since heresy is typically understood to be a **rejection of some part of religious truth**?

An **example of religious heresy** is a Christian who says that Jesus was a great teacher, but who does not affirm that he is God. Jesus **was**, indeed, a great teacher. And he *is* God!

A heretic—by definition—**rejects part** of the truth.

But, how could there be a **secular**—that is, a *non-religious*—heresy?

Well, once we recognize that **secular codes of *speech* and *conduct*** are **preached** and **enforced** much more **vigorously**—and sometimes more **violently**—than the **strictest religious laws**, we realize that the **secular society** often behaves **more** like a **fundamentalist religion** than many *fundamentalist religions* behave!

The **secular heresy** that underlies the **flip-flopping Senator’s** position in the **illustration** is **this** nonsensical idea:

“If you *disagree* with me, or with the way I live, that means you *hate* me.”

The authentic Christian position, of course, is to ***hate the sin and to love the sinner***. But the secular culture **deliberately *misconstrues* the Christian code** to mean that “to hate the **sin** *is* to hate the **sinner**”.

What the secular fundamentalists fail to see is that, if we Christians actually hated sinners, we would hate ***ourselves***, because **we are *all* sinners**.

Before Jesus **unleashed** his miraculous healing power **publicly**—as with the healing of the leper in today’s Gospel text—he **preached** the **truth**. We need only go back a few verses in the **Gospel of Mark** to recall how people reacted to Jesus’ words:

...they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. (Mk 1:22)

Jesus taught the truth in a way that penetrated hearts. A few verses even **further** back in **Mark’s Gospel**, we read what he actually preached:

Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”
(Mk 1:14-15)

The people who responded so readily to Jesus weren’t “**offended**” by his call to repent—as if he were condemning **them** by exposing their **sinfulness**. Instead, they sensed at a deep level, “**Something *is* wrong with us. This guy *gets* it. And he can *do* something about it.**” So, when Jesus started **healing** people and **driving out demons**, they saw his power to **implement** his teaching play out before their very eyes...and they believed!

Sadly, we live at a **time**, and in a *society*, which doesn't like to even *talk* about sin, let alone **admit its existence**. But the incident between **Jesus and the leper** in today's **Gospel** provides an excellent context to consider the **intersection of human sin** with the **Divine Mercy of Jesus Christ**.

But what does the leper's **skin disease** have to do with our *sin disease*?

The answer lies partially hidden in our **1st Reading**. In this passage from the **Book of Leviticus**, we see the rather **odd requirement** that a leper must be **examined**—not by a **doctor**, but—by a *priest*. If the person was found to have leprosy, the **priest declared** him unclean and the leper had to stay away from the community, **declaring *himself* or *herself*** “unclean” when anyone approached.

Why would a leper be declared “**unclean**” instead of just “**sick**”? Because leprosy—in addition to being a **hideously disfiguring physical affliction**—was also considered by Jews to be *ritual impurity* that kept the leper out of the **Temple**—that is, out of **God's own house**. As a result, the leper was effectively excluded from **relationship** with **God** and with the **community**. So, for Jews, leprosy was not just a **physical** disease. It was a **visible** manifestation of **interior** “uncleanness”.

For our purposes, we need only remember that *sin* **does to the soul what leprosy does to the body**. Leprosy causes **disfigurement** and can even cause **blindness**. *Sin*, likewise **disfigures our identity** as God the Father's beloved sons and daughters, while **blinding us to God**. One of the eight **Beatitudes** proclaims:

Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God. (Mt 5:8, NAB)

Obviously, if we need a **clean** heart to be able to **see** God, then an “**unclean**” heart **blinds us** to God. Sin, then, really is “**spiritual leprosy**” that disfigures and blinds the sinner.

That's the *bad news*.

The **Good News** for us is found in what we might call “**Rules for Lepers**” from today's **1st Reading** and **Gospel**. We'll consider **four stages in the process of readmitting a leper back into the community**, noticing how these same stages parallel the way that a **sinner is welcomed back into Communion** with the Church through **Sacramental Confession**.

First, with regard to **physical leprosy**, the priest would examine the leper **directly** and, if he found evidence of the disease, would declare the person “**unclean**”.

The modern parallel is more *indirect*. Instead of **directly** examining the soul of the “**spiritual leper**” (the sinner), a faithful priest *preaches* the *fullness of the Gospel* to bring about the **repentance** and **conversion** of his flock. By **receiving the standard of Christian perfection** through clear preaching, the faithful are able to compare their lives to the *Christian ideal* to see where sin has **infected, disfigured** or **blinded** them.

The **next step** with regard to **physical leprosy** would be for the leper to **declare himself or herself “unclean”** and **distance himself or herself from the community** so as not to *contaminate* them.

The modern parallel is the **Examination of Conscience**, where the **sinner** examines his or her life **in the light of the Gospel** to see whether or not he or she is living up to Christian standards. If serious sin is detected, *the sinner distances himself or herself from Holy Communion so as not to bring disgrace on himself or the community*.

The **next step** with **physical leprosy** is taken when the disease shows **evidence** of healing. The leper **presents himself or herself to the priest**, for the priest to **verify** the healing.

The **modern parallel for us “spiritual lepers”** is **Confession**, where we submit our sickness to the healing power of Jesus in order to be “**made clean**” once again. **When the priest can verify that the “sin disease” no longer dominates the life of the penitent**, but rather, that the penitent has **submitted** to the *healing mercy of Jesus*, the priest can give the spiritual leper a “**clean bill of spiritual health**” through the **Prayer of Absolution**.

The **final stage** for the **physical leper** was to “**offer for his or her cleansing**” what the Mosaic Law prescribed.

The **parallel** for the “**spiritual leper**” of today is **Penance** following **Sacramental Confession**.

Now, by revisiting the **first stage** in this sequence—*the preaching of the truth of the Gospel*—we gain even greater insight into what **today’s Gospel** teaches us.

There are a lot of Catholics today who **actually** believe—and who may even have been told by *priests*—that Sacramental Confession was no longer necessary after **Vatican II**.

But, the only thing that could legitimately eliminate the need for Confession would be the elimination of sin.

As long as we sin, we need Confession. **Period.**

How many of us would dare to assert that we are without sin? Here's what **St. John** wrote in his **1st New Testament Letter** about those who **declare themselves sinless**:

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 Jn 1:6-9)

The point, here is not to hammer on **sinner**s—*because I am one*. Instead, here's a **quote** from a **world-renowned priest** who had some convicting words for all priests. He said:

“Empty preaching leads to empty Confessionals.”

Confessionals are *not* empty these days because people have *stopped sinning*.

Confessionals are empty because priests have stopped doing their job—reaching out to **spiritual lepers** through the faithful proclamation of the Gospel.

Just as actual lepers were prohibited from entering the Temple until they could be declared clean by a priest, **spiritual lepers today who have not been absolved from mortal sin by a priest in the Sacrament of Confession must not dare approach Holy Communion**, not because it's an **arbitrary rule**, but rather, because it's *deadly to the soul* to do so.

Unfortunately, the idea of *ever abstaining from Holy Communion* is a foreign concept to many of **today's Catholics**. But I don't fault the *faithful* for this ignorance. I fault *cowardly priests*. And I will share a **personal story** to tell you *why* I hold **priests** accountable.

In my final year in the seminary, I went to Mass in the seminary chapel one day but, because I felt **unworthy to receive the Eucharist** that particular day, I *did not present myself for Communion*. Shortly thereafter, I was summoned to the office of one of the priests on the formation staff and questioned about why I didn't receive Communion. I told the priest I was aware of mortal sin and did not feel worthy to receive Jesus in the Eucharist until I went to Confession. He said, **“Well, it's our custom here for everyone to receive Communion at Mass.”** Needless to say, I was dumbfounded.

My brothers and sisters, **if future priests are being formed in the seminary to avoid confronting sin *in their own lives*, how likely are they to confront sin in the lives of *their people*?**

The fact of the matter is that, if a person insists on receiving Holy Communion while aware of being in mortal sin, **they receive no grace from the Sacrament** anyway!

As we head into **Lent**, I offer a **challenge**.

If you know you are in a state of mortal sin, you may **nevertheless** be afraid to stay in the pew during Holy Communion because of what your **spouse**, your **kids** or your **fellow** parishioners might think of you.

Here's what you need to know.

It's nobody else's business!

In fact, if someone has the integrity to revere our Eucharistic Lord by **not forcing him into an "unclean" soul**, they should be **admired** for their respect for Jesus. Besides, ***if everyone at Mass each Sunday were honest about the state of their soul before receiving Holy Communion***, there would, no doubt, be a **smaller line** for **Communion** than we see on a typical Sunday, and a much **larger line** for **Confession** during the more than **10 hours per week** we offer **Confession** here at the Cathedral.

St. Paul wrote this about those who insist on receiving Communion while in mortal sin:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. (1 Cor 11:27-29)

Despite those **chilling words** from St. Paul, ***we spiritual lepers*** who readily admit to our uncleanness, and beg Jesus for his healing mercy, will be **touched, healed, and embraced** by Christ...who **delights** in forgiving us.

If we have the **integrity, humility and courage** of the leper in today's Gospel to say to Jesus: ***"If you wish, you can make me clean"*** (cf. Mk 1:40)...then we will also experience the great **joy** of hearing Jesus say to us: ***"I do will it. Be made clean"*** (cf. Mk 1:41).