

Here are some thoughts to ponder:

--If lawyers are disbarred and clergymen defrocked, then doesn't it follow that electricians can be delighted, musicians de-noted, cowboys de-ranged, models de-posed, tree surgeons de-barked, and dry cleaners de-pressed?

--What hair color do they put on the driver's licenses of bald men?

--And finally, why do they put pictures of criminals up in the Post Office? Are we supposed to write to them? Why don't they just put their pictures on the postage stamps so the mailmen can look for them while they deliver the mail?

When I was working on this gospel passage from Mark this week, I came across a piece of paper from a daily Mass homily that Deacon Rich had given on this text. And I had written on the top: "Have Rich preach this weekend." Sorry, you're stuck with me. But this first point on the background is from Rich. First, the Greek word for Leprous means 'scaly' and referred to any serious scaly skin disorder. Since these diseases were incurable at the time, many believed God inflicted the curse of leprosy upon people for the sins they committed. This account shatters the idea that God is the cause of anyone's affliction.

Those with leprosy were so despised and loathed that they were not allowed to live in the community with their own people. They weren't allowed to enter any city and had to stay in deserted places. They weren't allowed to come within 6 feet of another person, including their own family, or within 150 feet of anyone when the wind was blowing. Lepers lived in this way until they either got better on their own or died. It was a hopeless situation.

Josephus, a Jewish historian of the time, wrote that "Lepers were treated as if they were the living dead, corpses," and other writings praised throwing stones at people with leprosy.

The English translation of this gospel text runs the risk of seeming rather superficial. Jesus is on His way somewhere when a fellow comes forward who is sick. He asks Jesus for help, Jesus feels sorry for him, says sure, touches him, cures him and sends him on his way – only slightly inconvenienced by the interruption.

But in the original language this narrative tells a very different story.

Now the fact that the leper came to Jesus in the first place is shocking. He risks being stoned; he risks his life pushing through the crowd to get to Jesus. He violated all of the established norms of exclusion because of his desperation. He came to Jesus pleading with him for help.

Interestingly, he is sure that Jesus has the power to cleanse him, but he's unsure of Jesus' will to do so. "If you will, you can make me clean." He's not sure that Jesus cares enough to do it.

We hear that Jesus was moved with pity for him. This is so much more than feeling sorry for him. The precise meaning is that Jesus had a gut-wrenching experience of compassion for him. Jesus is moved in the depths of His being and enters into and shares in the suffering of the leper.

Next we're told that Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him. Now this sounds like Jesus is going around bopping people on the forehead and yelling 'be healed!' Actually, it says that Jesus reached out and CLUNG to him. It's the word to describe the embrace between a husband and a wife. So, Jesus

does not merely touch him, which would be remarkable in its own right, for nobody dared to touch a leprous person, but Jesus pulls him in and hugs him.

So picture that. This man who has, for God knows how long, been no nearer than 6 feet to another human being, is grasped and pulled into an embrace by Jesus, as he hears the words, "I do will it." In the Semitic culture, TO WILL something was to delight in it. In other words, Jesus is saying that it would satisfy His own deepest LONGINGS to cleanse him of his affliction.

Then Jesus warns him 'sternly,' but it literally means to snort like a bull or roar like a wild animal. Entering intimately into communion with his suffering, Jesus groans with him and sets him free of his infirmity.

But what does the man do? He went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He TELLS EVERYONE! We shouldn't see this as an act of disobedience but as a sign of just how complete his cure has been. After this encounter, his life no longer revolves around his sickness and isolation, it now revolves around Jesus. Jesus has become the center of his universe, and he shares this good news with anyone willing to listen.

The effect is that Jesus has traded places with the leper. Jesus is now the one unable to enter a town openly and has to remain in deserted places. God isn't the source or cause of our suffering, He is the source of our healing. (all this taken from Rich's notes)

So how does any of this apply to us? My second point, on the importance of touch. Many of Jesus' gestures and signs broke through what was customary, even though they were still embedded in the culture of the world of the time. We must see that in all of His actions, Jesus had a deep BIBLICAL awareness of the human being. He was always making an affirming statement about the bodily nature of the human being, and thus about a crucial dimension of our human existence. The human being is dust and earth, but dust and earth into which God has breathed His own breath (Gen 2:7), and therefore Jesus can make a paste of earth and spread it on a blind man's eyes and give him sight, or pull a man into a deep embrace and heal his leprosy. These acts are more than instances of natural healing, and they have nothing to do with magical practices. Rather, they make it clear that healing and liberation are not something purely spiritual or merely internal. Earth comes to the aid of humanity (Rev 12:16), and the body is to be redeemed just as is the soul. Remember we profess belief in the resurrection of the BODY, not just the soul.

Jesus had a deep relationship with physical gestures and the language of the body. He lived in an unbroken relationship to human physicality. Jesus is not alien to or opposed to the body; for Him, body and bodiliness are indispensable aspects of humanity, and they are, as the Book of Genesis reminds us good, indeed, very good.

This is important -- because culturally, we have a very mixed relationship with the physicality of our bodies. We often hate our bodies -- we see ourselves as too fat, too thin, too short, too tall. We don't like our nose, our eyes, our chin, ears, bushy hair, no hair, whatever. But that is to disdain the handiwork of God, who created us exactly as we needed to be, for a myriad of reasons, some known perhaps to God alone.

But Jesus took the body and its needs seriously. No one could have said of Him what antiquity said of the pagan philosopher Plotinus and what Athanasius reported of the Christian hermit Antony: Plotinus "lived like someone who was ashamed to have been born into a human body," and Antony "blushed" when he ate in the presence of others.

*"This is not claimed as original material; it is the fruit of years of reading and research, collated by volunteers, but not always correctly footnoted, or not footnoted at all. It was created solely for the purpose of an oral proclamation in the context of the liturgy of the church. Every effort has been made to provide the necessary attribution to the authors of the sources."*

The incarnation nature of Jesus' work is obvious in His deeds of healing but also in all His signs and gestures: God's salvation must enter into the world and penetrate every facet of its reality. Redemption is meant for the whole of creation, not just the soul. The whole history of revelation has been a progressive reminder of how deeply God is involved in the world He created. God has 'moved in with us' to do us good, or as John 1:14 says "He pitched His tent with us," or most simply, "He became flesh." (adapted from Gerhard Lohfink, JESUS OF NAZARETH, Liturgical Press, 2012, p. 122-124)

And lastly, an application, to this gospel and its intimate depiction of touch, and the Sabbath celebration we do each weekend. At the Last Supper, Jesus took off His clothes and wrapped Himself in a towel, poured water over the naked feet of His friends and, one by one, taking time with each, washed their feet. Water, hands, touch, flesh, intimate physical contact; a final act of intimacy, of knowing, before He would leave them. As if touching them, naked flesh to naked flesh, were a sanctification of His love for them.

The Talmud prescribes the Sabbath as a time for couples to make love. In fact, according to the Talmud, a devout Jewish couple is to make love 3 times on the Sabbath! Wayne Muller reports in his book on SABBATH, that he asked an Orthodox rabbi if, in fact, the rabbi and his wife made love 3 times on the Sabbath. I love the rabbi's response: "Always once, sometimes twice, and a deep intention for the third." The Sabbath is a time to feel in our bodies the delicious union with God, and if we are married, with our beloved, bridging any separation we may feel from our divine nature and our physical reality. God aches for us, LONGS for us; we respond by removing our clothing, and in our nakedness, skin receptive, open and available and vulnerable, we touch and are touched, intimately known and held. How else would we know the sweet blessings of God?

Why does the Sabbath emphasize sensuality and touch? Because it is a language of healing, of blessing, as the leper in today's gospel experienced. When premature infants are regularly massaged, they gain weight more easily. When we lay on hands, when we place a hand on the brow of an infant and utter the words of baptism, when a husband and wife cleave together to make life, when we break bread and eat, when we savor wine and drink, when we join hands in prayer, we are in deep conversation with the divine spirit of creation. All life arises through touch; nothing living thrives without physical contact.

I knew a woman who had a hyperactive son. After trying various failed medications, she decided to use her deep love for him as her primary treatment. Whenever he began to lose control of his impulses, she would scoop him up and sit him in her lap, place his head against her chest, and rock, and rock, until, she said, he could remember who he was.

The Sabbath rocks us and holds us until we can remember who we are. If we are too deeply and fully integrated into the rhythm of our lives, we need a sense memory, a visceral bodily experience of what it feels like to be delightfully inactive. We need touch. We need all of the senses to be stimulated. Students who study in the presence of a fragrance do better on tests when the same fragrance is later present in the testing room. If we grew up Catholic, we relished the smell of incense when we walked into the church. On the Sabbath we smell spices, perhaps incense at Mass, we bring flowers, we smell the bread in the oven, and we are transported, we recall feelings and insights we have known before, and we remember. When Sabbath is done and we return to our labor, we carry the fragrance of rest in our bodies. (adapted from Wayne Muller, SABBATH: RESTORING THE SACRED RHYTHM OF REST, p. 150-151)

May the touch of God heal us, as it did the leper; may our loving touch of others be healing for them. And may our Sabbath celebrations help us to touch – and heal our broken and hurting world. Amen.