

Leprosy was a horrible disease, perhaps the most feared of the ancient world. It struck fear and horror into its victims because there was no hope for a cure. Cultures throughout the world would exile the leper from the community.

Leprosy, now properly called Hansen's disease, is a chronic bacterial disease that affects the skin, the peripheral nerves in the hands and feet, and the mucous membranes of the nose, throat and eyes. Skin lesions are the primary external symptom. Gradually the sense of touch, the ability to feel one's surroundings is obscured. It is a progressive disease, causing permanent damage to the skin, nerves, limbs and eyes.

But maybe even more harmful than the disease itself, was being banished from friends, family and community. A leper was physically, socially and even religiously exiled from the community; they were the untouchables of their day. They had to live outside of town. They had to cry out their state: "Leper or unclean" as they walked by. They had to wear ragged clothing and let their hair go uncombed and uncut. But even more tragically, leprosy was also seen as a sign of spiritual uncleanness, God's punishment for sin. And anyone who came into any contact whatsoever with a leper was also considered to unclean.

So image the courage of this man in the Gospel. He dares to cross the boundary separating the clean from the unclean. It was risky. By merely approaching Jesus, he could have been stoned to death. It was a bold and desperate act. He approaches Jesus and asks, "If you wish, you can make me clean."

Can you image his fear as he waits for Jesus' answer? Would Jesus pull back in horror and revulsion? Would Jesus send him back into exile? No, Jesus does the utterly unthinkable. He reaches out his hand and touches him and says, "I do will it." What a surprise that must have been! It was probably the first time in years that someone clean had touched him.

Jesus could have cured him from a distance or with a simple word. But Jesus touches him. You can hear the crowd gasp as they see Jesus reach out and touch him, sores and all. Jesus heals him not only of the disease, but also of his isolation. Jesus heals him with a touch.

This story tells us so much about our God. Our God is not distant. Our God is utterly approachable. Our God is touchable, and reaches out to touch us, no matter what.

But it also tells us about whom we are called to be, as followers of Jesus. St. Paul challenges us to imitate Christ. Jesus gives his power to his disciples. Each one of us possesses the wonderful capacity to be instruments of the healing power of Christ. We are invited to be ministers of healing. We are called to touch not just the physically ill, but all whose lives are hurting and need healing in any way possible.

Touch is so important to life. Just ask a pediatric nurse how important touching a newborn baby is for the child's survival and health. We need warm, loving and nurturing touch. It is vital for our existence.

And yet it seems that we build barriers to keep us apart. We walk around listening to our iPods. We send a text message, an email or a voicemail instead of actually having a conversation. We greet someone with a "how are you" but don't wait for a response. We have become so busy that we can't find or make the time to chat with a neighbor. We even come to Mass late and leave early so that we get on with our day and not encounter anyone.

For Jesus, it is all about the encounter. He broke through barriers with a touch. He slowed down, stopped and didn't see a disease or a distraction, he saw a person. Perhaps the invitation of this liturgy is for us to slow down a bit, to really see those persons around us, and touch one another.

A couple of practical suggestions: 1) make an effort to introduce yourself to someone you don't know; 2) see the person seated by you; 3) get to know our catechumens and candidates — you can identify them by the wooden crosses they wear to liturgy; 4) after Mass visit with 2 people you don't know before you chat with old friends; 5) visit or call an old friend.

I know it is not easy; it takes work. I am going to try it, won't you?

We are a community of believers who are touched by God and called to touch one another.