

HOMILY SUNDAY 06 – B\*

“The Three Legged Healing Stool”

(Leviticus 13:1-2, 45-46; Psalm 32; 1 Cor 10:23-11.1; Mark 1:40-45)

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A man took out a \$5 million insurance policy, slid his car off the road into a tree and claimed he was paralysed shoulders down. Insurance agents visited him, tried to get some physical response out of him to disprove it, but couldn't get him to move a muscle. Finally one told him they were sure he was faking, but that they had to pay him out since they couldn't disprove it. But then, what would he be able to do with it anyway, since he was paralysed? The man responded that he would ask a relative to put him on a stretcher, take him to Lourdes, and then they would see the biggest miracle they had ever heard of.

This humorous story is not a good example of an attitude that leads to healing. Today's gospel, on the other hand, offers us three essential elements for healing, like a three legged stool.

Experience the healing power of Jesus in your life through faith, self-awareness and fellowship.

Faith, self-awareness and fellowship are three components of healing present in today's gospel. Let us walk through this very interesting and intriguing gospel, teasing out these elements.

The first striking note is the strong faith of the leper and his desire to heal. He not only defies the rule of warning people to stay away by going directly up to Jesus and begging him; his request actually takes the form of an affirmation of Jesus' power to heal. He recognizes Jesus as one in whom the power of God is at work, as only God can “make clean”. The Law was helpless against leprosy and could not heal it - it could only defend the community against it, and actually condemned those who had it to a life of lonely isolation. The leper had amazing faith that what the Law could not do, Jesus could if he so chose.

It goes without saying that the leper was also very much aware that he was a leper. The word for “leprosy” meant any scaly skin disease. In that religion and society, people were shunned, set apart, isolated, and excluded until they could be certified clean by a priest, the only one who had that authority. It was a terrible price to pay – becoming a social outcast, rejected by society. The leper knew who he was, and did not deny it, hide it or try to rationalize it. He was humble and honest and self-aware, the second element for healing to happen.

Thirdly, he reached out for help – he entered into fellowship. He came to Jesus, begging and kneeling in supplication. That is the third element for healing – Jesus works through community, through other people. The leper reached out to another human being, and experienced healing, through faith, self-awareness and fellowship. That fellowship can include the power of touching another human being, like the Elephant Man touched by Mrs. Kendall, a famous British actress. Her insistence on shaking hands with his deformed hand, that touching acceptance, was the beginning of his transformation.

Before applying this message to our own lives, let us explore what happens in the rest of the story.

Jesus is moved with compassion, or pity, or perhaps even anger. Some commentators translate the word as anger. Perhaps Jesus is upset at the presence of such an illness and its impact on people, or perhaps he was upset at the social and religious system that had developed in the face of such a disease that shunned and excluded those who had it.

Either way, Jesus breaks all the social and religious taboos, reaches out and touches the leper, and heals him. I believe it is the acceptance, the unconditional love, the full caring attention of the Son of God that healed the man, and can also heal us.

What happens next is called the “Messianic Secret” in the gospel of Mark – Jesus warns the man not to say anything because he does not want to be known only as a miracle worker. He wants people to believe in who he is, the Son of God, the Redeemer who would redeem us through his death on the Cross, who could not only heal us physically, but came to forgive us our sins and heal us of our sinfulness, that which makes us sin, our character defects and bad habits.

Jesus also shows respect for the Law and its demands (as long as it does not contradict his healing work) and asks him to show himself to the priest and offer the prescribed sacrifices. The man, however, having seen how Jesus was not held back by social and religious restrictions when it came to love and healing, took his cue and, having been liberated and healed by Jesus, has only one thought – to rejoice and tell everyone he sees what Jesus has done for him. He becomes a model of what all of us should do as disciples – spread the Good News of Jesus Christ and his healing power. A Christian is one “cleansed” by Christ in baptism, one who then ought to “preach” and “spread abroad the Good News.”

In summary, then, the leper was healed through faith, fellowship and self-awareness. That is also how we can and will be healed. Our faith in Jesus must be strong. We must recognize him as one in whom the power of God is at work.

We also must be humble, honest and open about our need to heal. The physical healings of Jesus are a symbol of the deeper inner healing of our personalities and relationships and lives that Jesus wants to accomplish. The leper was not only healed physically, but he was also restored to the community – he was healed relationally and socially. And so it is with us.

That is where we need fellowship. Often we are spiritually blind, totally unaware of our need for healing of some bad habit or defect of character, like false pride, manipulating others, control, lust for power, or even addiction, either chemical or process, like sexual addiction. It is amazing how we can deny, blame, project and rationalize our own pathologies, and block any healing. There are times when we need to turn to others, get feedback from them, and learn where we need healing. In most cases, fellowship and self-awareness go hand in hand.

One man recently shared with me how his wife, who is very negative, stubborn and depressed, does not acknowledge how she is ruining their marriage and family life. She is driving her children to resentment and him to the brink of wanting to separate. Once she came to him and told him that she now knew what the problem was in their relationship – he was filling her with venom! That is denial, blame and projection, and she is blocking her own healing.

I remember a time when I was unaware of a need for healing in my own life. We had met as a pastoral team to discuss pastoral care in the hospital of the mission where two of us were stationed. That night I noticed that my brother Oblate was agitated and suggested we dialogue. At first he resisted but then agreed. We wrote our feelings down on paper, exchanged the paper Marriage Encounter style, and I read the following words: “At the meeting today, I felt like they would do what you wanted no matter what I said”. I was shocked – that was the first time that I had any inkling that I was giving off the impression that I was in charge, in control. That helped me to admit it, accept it, talk about it, pray about it and ask God to heal me, and healing has happened, through faith, fellowship and self-awareness.

The twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous take us precisely down this three-legged stool path of healing. Four of the Steps are all about Faith in God (2,3,7,11); four of the Steps are all about Self-Awareness (1, 4, 6, 10), and the last four are all about Fellowship (5, 8, 9, 12). The power of God working through Jesus as our Higher Power saturates the Steps. All we have to do is work them.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is a celebration of those three areas of healing. We believe that God’s love is present in Word and Sacrament; we are aware of our need for forgiveness and healing, and we celebrate this together as a community of wounded people, coming together to be transformed into the Body of Christ, to become ourselves, wounded healers, sent out to spread the good news to the world.

So, experience the healing power of Jesus in your life through faith, self-awareness and fellowship.