

**Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
(Feb. 12, 2006)**

People Kept Coming to Him

Do you know about Father Damien of Molokai? Does that name mean anything to you? Father Damien was a Belgian priest who went as a missionary to the Hawaiian Islands back in the nineteenth century. After serving for a number of years on the island of Hawaii he volunteered to be the Catholic priest for the lepers on the island of Molokai. There were about 800 of them and they were his parish. For ten of his sixteen years there he never saw another priest or non-native person. One day he electrified his congregation by beginning his sermon with the words, “My fellow lepers.” He himself had contracted the disease.

And from that time on, everything was different. He was one of them, and like them he was totally isolated from the rest of the human race for the remaining years of his life. Damien did not just suffer physical isolation like the rest of his fellow lepers. Shortly after his dramatic admission of his condition, rumors started circulating about the manner in which he had contracted the disease. Scandalous tales were told about Damien’s contact with the women of Molokai, and to make matters worse, his own religious superiors disavowed him, and when he died they did not want to receive his body for burial in their own cemetery. Not until after a thorough investigation cleared Damien of all the allegations would they welcome him for burial.

The people of Molokai have always honored Damien as a saint even though the Church has not canonized him, but they knew how he had given himself to them, how he had loved them and cared for them, and that was all that mattered as far as they were concerned.

Our readings today talk a lot about lepers, whether it’s the Book of Leviticus spelling out instructions for lepers to follow or Jesus showing the compassion that Damien imitated. Two things are striking. First of all, the boldness of the leper. The Levitical law had forbidden him to approach someone who did not have the same disease, but he was not afraid to fall on his knees before Jesus and make an extraordinary act of faith: if you want

to you can cure me. The Gospel tells us that Jesus was moved with pity. He stretched out his hand and in violation of the Levitical law, he touched him. He risked ritual uncleanness as well as the danger of contracting the disease in order to heal the man. As far as Jesus was concerned these two dangers were insignificant in comparison with what he intended to do for the leper. There is something far more important going on than the risk of ritual impurity or contagion. This is an act of salvation. This is what Jesus has come to do.

Jesus has come to heal the wounds of sin and division. Healing the leper is a marvelous image of this. Lepers are people set apart, denied ordinary contact with others, ostracized because of their disease. When Jesus cures them, he not only restores them to physical wholeness, he also restores them to the community as well. "Go, show yourself to the priest." Jesus has come to heal the whole world in this same way. All of us are in need of salvation; all of us feel alienated in some way, separated, divided from others, and all of us need to feel the healing touch of the Lord. In a special way Jesus sees his mission directed to those who live on the periphery of society: the lepers, the poor, the unwanted, the prostitutes, the tax-collectors, the ones that society neglects. But they, too, are the children of God.

So what does all this mean to us? What is the challenge the scripture gives us today? Well, the least we can say is that somehow or other we are being asked to join in this same work of salvation. And the very least we can do is follow the exhortation of Paul: Whatever you do – whether you eat or drink or anything else – do all for the glory of God and give offense to no one. Well, that's already a great deal. But it seems to me that our commitment to follow Jesus Christ demands even more than that. It requires us to help heal the wounds of sin and division.

Society still tends to exclude people and to treat them as social lepers no less than in the time of Jesus. Consciously or not our attitudes are fashioned by social customs which are often biased, often racist. Let's face it. We have many examples of exclusion of people on the basis of nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, or social class. Jesus will have none of that. Everyone is welcome in the Kingdom of God. And so everyone must be welcome in our church and as far as possible, everyone

must be welcome in our lives when we go out of this church. The greatest challenge Jesus presents to us today, indeed in any age or culture, is his over-riding love for the human person, whether that person be virtuous or sinful. His love is the same. The only adequate, the only reasonable, response on our part is, with the grace of God, to go and do likewise.