Gospel reading Mark 1:40-45  [To be read aloud]

A leper came to Jesus and kneeling down begged him and said, “If you wish, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, “I do wish it. Be made clean.” The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. He said to him, “See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them.” The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

Brief commentary:

Throughout Ordinary Time, the Church’s gospel readings continue to call us to follow Jesus in his mission of preaching, liberation and healing. Today’s gospel reading allows us to glimpse further into the motives of Jesus and the profound effects his mission had on the people who met him: and story of the healing of a leper is a great example. The fear of leprosy, its stigma, and measures to prevent its spread are well documented in texts such today’s first reading from Leviticus. No doubt, to have a disease like leprosy could only mean social isolation as a way to quarantine the infected from the healthy population. This is basic immunology, with the Temple priesthood serving as an ancient form of the CDC. By the time of Jesus these measures – as well as those associated with ritual purity – were deeply woven into both the social and religious fabric of Jewish Palestine. In this context, the gospel reading for today invites us to appreciate the profound impact that Jesus’ attitude toward the sick, the outcast and the ritually unclean, must have had. The text tells us that the leper “came to Jesus,” so he must have had a daring faith to break through the legal norms regulating the distance he was to keep from the healthy and ‘clean’. But we are even more astonished by Jesus’ response. First he is ‘moved with pity’, which is deep heartfelt personal empathy – which is a strong sentiment of paternal/maternal love – and thus a glimpse into Jesus’ deep concern for people in need.

Second, and even more astonishing, we read how Jesus broke through all legal, social, and religious norms and daringly “touched” the man with leprosy. It was an act of real personal solidarity and intrepid love. This human touch – without which no one can survive and thrive – reveals a lot about the sort of person Jesus of Nazareth was. Jesus did not see a ‘leper’, but rather he saw a ‘human being’ in great need. Jesus put people ahead of norms, public or religious pressures, stigmas and rumors. Jesus put God and people first, and did not succumb to the social pressures of his day. By so doing, not only did he acknowledge the man’s dignity and worth, but publically restored it. It must have been amazing for this man to be so affirmed by such a popular figure like Jesus, when everyone else had so avoided him. He was saved not only from the dread of leprosy, but also from the indignity of social isolation, from marginalization. Jesus took a great risk by touching this person, but this is in fact the sort of risks that love takes. Everyone who daily take such risks to affirm and defend the vulnerable, attend to the marginalized and outcast, identify with the avoided and feared, are doing God’s work of love. And Jesus’ action is this gospel vindicates their work and promotes their efforts. In Jesus Christ something new has also happened: in Jesus God touches our humanity ‘in person’ – God touches our humanity in its frailty and brokenness, in its woundedness and dis-ease and alienation, and does so to make us whole: “I will it, be made clean.” All who have been healed, restored, liberated, revived by Jesus Christ are to, his name and with his heart of compassion, do so for others.

Today’s reading offers significant messages:

- The story of Jesus’ healing of the leper reveals both his heart and the great impact he had on those he helped.
- The man with leprosy ‘came to Jesus’ believing he could make him whole. Faith leads us to trust in Christ, assured of his compassion and grace.
- Having been touched by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we too are to break through social pressures and reach out to the outcast and marginalized, the sick and forgotten, to be the hand of Christ touching their lives, seeking their wholeness.

For our shared or personal reflection:

After a brief pause for silent reflection share your answers, ideas or feelings.

- How do I ‘come to Jesus’, with my leprosies, my corruption and sin, my woundedness and brokenness, so that he could make me whole?
- How have I felt the touch of Jesus in my life?  How have I experienced God’s saving grace?
- Who are the lepers in my society, in my community, in my circle of neighbors, that I can reach out to as an emissary of Christ’s loving concern?

Suggested readings: Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraphs 514-21, 1499-1513