

UNCLEAN: HIM OR ME?

This morning I received my second injection for the corona-virus. This will not prevent me from getting covid19 but it really lowers my chances and if I should get the disease it will be in much milder form. I have had two fourteen-day quarantine periods over the twelve months of this disease. I have remarked before that the ancient ostracizing of a person with leprosy in the Jewish community has come into clearer focus and feels much more familiar to me after my own experiences this year. I will still mask and observe social distancing. But I believe I will be much less at risk from now on.

But I remember an early visit to the Artman Home to anoint a resident with the virus. The pastor there had me gown and double mask and glove and wear hair covering. I went into the person's room. They were not conscious of my presence. I went over and as I normally do placed my hands on their forehead and stroked their hair. The Pastor then said to me. "If you now use the same hand to dip your fingers into the holy oils have you not risked contaminating them?" I was not thinking at all along those lines. I went over to the corner of the room, took off my gloves, thoroughly washed my hands, donned new gloves and went back to the person. This time when it came time to lay hands on their head I placed my hands above their head and prayed, much as the bishop does at Confirmation when he raises his hands and prays over those to be confirmed. I anointed forehead and each hand and then finished the Last Rites.

Of course, though, I went over that whole scene in my mind afterwards. My hands were gloved. The very thing that the Anointing of the Sick does is what Jesus himself did, he laid hands on those who were sick and his disciples anointed them with oil. But of course he didn't have the corona-virus. But the man in the story for this Sunday had leprosy, also a highly contagious disease where people were quarantined indefinitely until they were cured or the symptoms left and they went to the priest to get permission to rejoin their families and live in the local community. Saint Mark says that Jesus touched the man. He put his hands on the leper. Something no one was allowed to do. But everything in me said to me that I should have laid my hands on that man's head and prayed over him the way I have prayed over countless dying people throughout the last many years.

I didn't want to catch the virus myself. I didn't want to be a source of contamination either. Very practical, common sense point of view. And yet, where was my faith in the power of the Lord to be with me and to render me and others safe if only I placed myself in his hands? In that man's room, for a few moments, I felt myself to be the outcast, the one who was isolated and estranged. I felt like I had the leprosy. It wasn't that the man wasn't sick with a contagious disease but there was a spiritual disease that surfaced in me in that moment. I who had been summoned to bring the Lord's healing

touch to bear on a man close to death gave in to the fear of not touching him. Mentally, I was hearing the voice proclaim: “Unclean! Unclean!”

I talked it over with some other priests. I decided that I was going to continue to administer the Sacrament of the Sick as I always had and I was going to place my trust in the Lord Jesus to render me safe and others safe. Some of you may think me foolhardy for deciding this. But if I am not confident in my faith, if I am fearful instead of hopeful, then I cannot be a fitting instrument in the hands of the Lord for the very people to whom he has sent me and for whom I have been ordained to minister.

In the Jewish community it was the priest who was the watchman for the community, the one who had to have the confidence to recognize when it was appropriate to return a person to family, home and community. I believe the priest still has such a role but it is precisely in the realm of our faith that it applies. My own faith is a necessary component part of that. Other priests have gotten the virus. Other priests have lived. Other priests have died. All is in the Lord’s hands. I do not in any way wish to be unwise. Wisdom is one of my gifts from God. But in this time and this moment the wisdom from my Lord bids me lay hands on those who are stricken. Take all the precautions. Get the vaccine. But then go forward in confidence and place all in the hands of the Lord. And place hands on those who are sick.

One rather wildly unrelated point to all I have just said. I believe that there is a fair number of Catholics who are in quarantine from the sacraments. And the sacraments are moments of our encounter with Christ and our relationship with Christ. People have been away. People are finding themselves reticent to come back. They don’t necessarily like being away but they may not feel they are ready to embrace all that our faith teaches about how best to live in this world. Many feel caught. Many find themselves in a kind of conundrum where they are not exactly sure how to get back or whether they really want to come back. But at the same time they miss the Lord. They miss that sense of having been forgiven. They miss the sense of receiving their Lord worthily in Holy Communion. I see it in the faces of people at funerals where they want to come back but don’t come to communion. And they are not comfortable or happy with where they are spiritually but they do not know how to get back.

Just come. Begin my making a return. You should know that everyone who has already returned—not all are coming to communion. Not everyone is ready for that yet. But they have come back. So. Come back. Take it a step at a time. Get to confession when you can. I promise I will make you feel most welcome and glad you have taken this important sacramental step. Do not be afraid. Here is what I suggest you do: Make the leper’s prayer in today’s gospel your own prayer: “Lord if you want to, you can cure me.” Pray it. He will do the rest. And Lent begins this week so the timing could not be better.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.