

“Moved with anger”... “Feeling sorry for him”... “His heart melted with compassion” – these are some of the Scripture translations” describing “moved with pity” when Jesus encountered the leper. Yet the term, *splagchinizomai*, a Greek word for compassion describing Jesus’ reaction, best translates as having one’s intestines or insides pour out in response. Jesus responded to the leper from deep within himself. He spilled his guts out for the man. It takes guts to follow Jesus who encountered a number of gut-wrenching situations that afflicted those who came seeking him as he was on the road proclaiming the good news.

Considered repulsive, impure and something to be avoided it was widely believed that those who developed leprosy were sinners being punished by God. So, as we hear in Leviticus, lepers were ostracized and separated from the community so as to contaminate others. Lepers became isolated outcasts, shouting “unclean, unclean” and were cut off from both their physical and spiritual community.

Fr. John McKenzie, noted scripture scholar, taught what all scholars teach about the historical Jesus: **one of the reasons the authority structure hated him was because he lived his life as though categories of “in and out” didn’t exist. He drove them crazy. Jesus intended his all inclusive behavior to be a sign that Yahweh doesn’t discriminate between “ins” and “outs.”**

Notice how Mark has Jesus cure the leper. “Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him and said, ”Be cured.” The touch is important or Mark wouldn’t have mentioned it. According to the laws in Leviticus, Jesus isn’t supposed to do that. Lepers are obligated to live in such a way that no “clean person” ever touches them, even by accident. **Yet the very action the law forbids is the action that cures. It takes guts and is risky business to follow Jesus.**

People have been thrown out of the church because of color of skin, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, nationality, poverty, etc. Some choose to build walls to build walls for protection. Jesus chooses to build bridges to invite people into the kingdom. In my 40 years as a priest, I’ve yet to experience anyone whom the church put out...(say divorce and remarriage)...coming back in precisely because they were put out. **People only return to the community when someone in that community reaches out to them, and touches them in all their “impurity.” Of course, the “ins” usually cast out the toucher along with the touched.**

Paul reminds the Corinthians that he constantly reaches out to others because he’s seeking “not his advantage, but that of the many...that they might be saved. Perhaps sometimes we who represent the institution are more worried about saving our own reputations than about saving the many. **May we have the “guts” to follow Jesus as we approach others who are different than we are...we have nothing to lose...everything to gain...for the other and for ourselves.**

