

**February 11, 2018 A Lepers Wish Granted Homily:** Brothers and sisters, remarkably, one of the most celebrated figures in the history of the one-time kingdom and now state of Hawaii, is a nineteenth century Belgian missionary, Father Damien. Today, a statue of the saint stands outside the Hawaiian State Capitol. In addition, one of the most popular tourist attractions on the island of Malakai is a shrine dedicated to the life and work of a man who lived only for lepers and who devoted his days and nights to their care.

In its extreme form, Leprosy, a disease of the skin, is a hideous and horrifying disease. The leper was often viewed as a 'living corpse' and the diseased person often lost the fingers of his hand, and as the disease progressed, his feet and entire hands as well. One of Father Damien's biographers writes, "The rotting flesh of the leprous people gave off a smell like that of an open grave". Unsurprisingly, lepers were cut off from human society, and lived in isolation from the healthy, even members of their own family. Some of you may recall the so-called "valley of the lepers" in the film "Ben Hur", in which the mother and sister of the fabled hero were compelled to live due to their horrific disease.

Father Damien, himself, contracted leprosy and died of the disease. He was only forty-nine years of age.

In biblical times, leprosy was seen as a punishment from God. The Law of Moses declared that lepers were impure, ritually unclean and unfit for worship in the temple. They could transmit their impurity to those who touched them and to places they entered. They had to live the heartbreak of being completely banished from human society and totally shunned. Leprosy was a civil and religious death.

In today's gospel (Mk. 1:40-45) Jesus enters a man's sick world. He does something truly unexpected and shocking: He reaches out and touches him, thereby making himself "unclean". The leper begs Jesus to be made clean (Mk.1:40). His desire is to be free again to partake of the worship of God's people. Jesus presents himself as the true doctor of humanity who is sent by the heavenly Father into the world disfigured by sin and human suffering

In his beautiful reflections on the healing of the leper, the erstwhile pope, Benedict XVI writes, "The gesture and those words of Jesus contain the whole history of salvation. They embody God's will to heal us, to purify us of all that disfigures us and ruins our relationship with God and others." The Pontiff also adds that at the climax of his life Jesus became a "leper, made impure by our sins and separated from God".

Over the past two millennia, there have been countless people who refused to turn away from another's suffering and steadfastly rejected the social conventions of the day. One example of extraordinary selflessness and courage was on display when the late Princess Diana, then husband of England's Prince Charles, extended her hand to an A.I.D.S. sufferer in the grip of a fatal disease. At the time, the disease was thought to be contagious by touch. It was a reckless expression of love and sympathy by a woman who, herself, was emotionally wounded. Her boldness may have offended the English aristocracy but certainly charmed the common folks who admired her genuine warmth.

In closing, I must share a tale from my own life. In the mid-nineties, I served as a priest chaplain at St. Peter's Hospital in Albany. In the middle of the night, I responded to an urgent call to come to the

hospital and give the last rites of the church to a young woman, who was close to death. When I entered the woman's room, I found her emaciated and perspiring heavily. I was moved to tears. Without a second thought, I leaned over and kissed the woman, white as a ghost, on the forehead. A short time later, one of the floor nurses told me she had died of A.I.D.S. I panicked. I was fearful that I may have contracted the disease. A lady doctor assured me that I was in no danger. A fellow chaplain and Catholic priest consoled me by saying I gave a wonderful send-off to a woman who, in all likelihood, had few moments of joy in her sad life. I then realized that for a very brief period of time, I possessed the courage of my Lord and his great affection for those in dire need of a humble and sweet gesture of kindness.

Amen!