

Good morning! My name is Deacon Joshua Fons, and I am in my last year of seminary, getting ready to be ordained a priest this June. I have been serving up the road at St. Patrick's on the weekends this year.

Looking around, I don't think we have too many Lepers here -- modern medicine and science has taken care of that. But all our modern inventions can't remove the things we have in our hearts, in our lives, that we believe make us unclean. I don't know what it is in your life, that particular thing you did or mistake you made, that struggle you have. That part of us we try to hide, that we are ashamed of. In a word, sin. Our sins. The things we have done that hurt ourselves, and other, and our relationship with God. But it is not just the sins, it is also that voice of the accuser, "Look at you, you are worthless, unclean, no good." "You shouldn't be here in Church. You are getting everyone else dirty." That relentless voice of the enemy who wants us to believe that the deepest truth about us is our sin.

And the challenge is that this voice feels true; that we really are unclean. I want us to take that, and bring it to this Gospel reading today.

A powerful way to pray with scripture is to put ourselves into the scene. Putting yourself in the shoes of this man, and his request. "If you wish, you can make me clean." Consider the weight of that request; your life as a leper has been only rejection, isolation, being looked at with disgust and fear. You come to Jesus, desperate, but confident. You've heard about Jesus, and that He is powerful. But notice the interesting preamble: if you wish. . .

We have heard the Gospel message, that Jesus frees us from our sins, and gives us new life. But do we believe it? Do I actually believe it? Like this guy: Jesus, you have healed all these other people. You've done all these great things over there. But do I believe You can do it, right here? That You can save me from my sins? Can You give me a new life? A new heart? That I can really experience freedom and peace living as a beloved son or daughter of God?

Do I believe He wills it for me?

But then Jesus reaches out His hand to you. As a leper, no one ever touches you. Imagine if those early days of social distancing were forever; no one has come close to you, no one has touched you in a long, long time. But then Jesus does. He is not afraid; He is not disgusted. Then He says: "I do will it. Be made clean."

Or as he says through Isaiah the prophet: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you." Christ wants to do that for us. Christ did not die on the Cross for us to remain in our sins.

But, it gets better. What did the ritual actually look like? Jesus tells him to go show himself to the priest and do the prescribed ritual. The symbolism is powerful and intentional. They would take two turtle doves or pigeons. One would be killed, sacrificed, and the other would be dipped in its blood, and then allowed to fly free. Christ took on

the burden, the cost of our sins. The wages on sin: death. He was the dove who had to die, so that we could go free, cleansed by His blood. Made clean, because He willed it. Because He thought you were worth it.

So, how does Christ want to bring this healing in your life? Not through killing pigeons, to be clear. Christ has given us our own ritual. Where we bring our sins to Him, we lay bare our hearts, and ask to be forgiven. We ask to be made clean from the one who can make us clean. We come to Him knowing that He is the one who can actually give us the healing we desire, and we ask to be made new. And we hear, through the ministry of the Priest, “I do will it, be made clean. I absolve you of your sins.”

Lent begins this Wednesday, with Ash Wednesday, and it is meant to be a season of Repentance, of turning from sin, and following Christ. I invite you to take this opportunity seriously. First, to go to confession. Especially if it has been a long time. To present yourself to the priest, and receive healing and forgiveness. Second, to intentionally turn to God in prayer. Perhaps committing to pray with the scriptures daily, or to pray the Rosary daily while meditating on the mysteries of the Life of Christ for each decade. Why? To come to know the Love of Christ for you. What He has done for you, and what He desires to do. And not just for you, not just so you can keep it to yourself, but so like that healed leper, you can tell many more about what kind of God we have.

And third, the third can begin right here, at this Mass. To see in this Eucharist, Christ reaching out, reaching out to us even in our leprosy and laying His hand on us. Pray for eyes to see this Lent just exactly how great a gift is the Eucharist...that Christ did not want us to be without His presence, without a visible, tangible reminder of His love, that saves us from our sins.

~Dcn. Josh