

## Sixth Sunday of the Year/Diocesan Youth Retreat “The Presence”

February 11, 2018 11:00 a.m.

Hackett Catholic Prep

I want to say how happy I am to be here with you, and commend you for being here, in spite of the huge snowfall. Nearly 300 of you have come from 21 Parishes all around our Diocese, and even a group from our neighbor to the North, the Diocese of Grand Rapids--- Welcome! I am also very grateful to all those diocesan Staff, Parish youth leaders, and other volunteers who have been organizing and planning this event, and have been accompanying you throughout these 40 Hours of your time together. And I have no doubt that we are all humbled that you could spend this weekend in the very Presence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Who has been “Present” really and truly in His Eucharistic Presence for many of these 40 hours together, “Present” through the Sacrament of Reconciliation that so many of you have received, in which you’ve experienced the “healing” and “merciful Love of Jesus, “Present” in this Closing Mass, and “Present” through the love that we share with each other as members of the Body of Christ.

The Scripture Readings we have just listened to for this Sixth Sunday of the Year are also ways in which the Lord makes Himself “Present” to us in His holy Word, as He always wants to speak to our hearts, and to encourage us in the ways we choose to live in union with His Word! As we know, Jesus IS the Word of God, made Flesh, Who came to make His dwelling among us. Jesus came to seek out the Lost, lift up the Lowly, give value to the Least, heal the Lame, and restore dignity to the Lepers.

There’s no more powerful demonstration of that than this Gospel passage we just heard. We don’t know, and perhaps can’t even begin to imagine, the fear that people felt in the face of leprosy. It was a terribly dreaded disease for which there was no cure at the time. And so, if you can’t treat it, then all you can do is protect the healthy as much as possible from it; and the only known way to do that was to banish the leper---to literally “excommunicate” them---expel them from the healthy community, and in that “banished” state, they were destined to live a life of isolation and exclusion. It was awful! It was truly a “living death”.

In today’s First Reading from the Book of Leviticus, we heard that all the way back in the Old Testament, 2,000 years before Jesus, that was the very same situation. Moses and Aaron determined the steps that the community needed to take to protect itself: the priest had to be the

one to declare the person “unclean” and to impose the “excommunication”. And the poor person not only had to bear the indignity of living apart from his/her family and friends forever, but had to make sure that no “healthy” or “clean” person ever accidentally came upon him/her by identifying himself, calling out “Unclean” to anyone who might inadvertently come near.

And so, to hear in today’s Gospel that a person with leprosy came running up to Jesus who was surrounded by His followers would have been an absolute shock! You can almost see the crowds scurrying away in fear for their own health and well-being. The person with leprosy had obviously heard about Jesus as Someone Special, knelt down at His feet, and boldly said: “*If You wish, You can make me clean!*” “**Gasp!!!**” (**from the crowds**). But that was nothing compared to what happened next. Because instead of keeping His distance, or turning away, Jesus, who St. Mark told us was “*moved with pity*”, “*stretched out His hand.....*”**Double Gasp!!!!**” (**from the crowd---You can almost hear them saying: “Nooooooooooooo!”.....and touched him.**” And then Jesus said: “*I do will it. Be made clean.*”

Even though Jesus had broken the Mosaic Law by touching someone so unclean, Jesus observed the Law by then telling the healed man to go to the priest so he could be officially declared healed, and thereby be reconciled to the community.

That is **really powerful!** There were two miracles performed at one moment: 1) the man was healed from leprosy; and 2) he was brought back to life, in a sense, from the “living death” that he had been destined to live for the rest of his life. Jesus touched him, and from that point on, that man could experience the essential need for human touch that each and every person craves. He could participate in human interactions; he once more had human dignity because, as the Mosaic Law dictated, he no longer had to “dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp”.

Now, other than the terrible flu that is at almost epidemic levels throughout the U.S., and the precautions that we take to try to avoid it, we don’t know what it’s like to experience isolation for medical reasons. But we can certainly experience “isolation” in other ways, can’t we? And unfortunately, from our earliest experiences of socialization even as children, and all the way throughout our lives, we can at times feel “isolated” if we sense that we’re not being accepted, or liked, or in the “in crowd”.

For most of you here on retreat, you’re at a time in your lives when that can be a particularly difficult challenge. If for whatever reasons, in your personal interactions with your peers, or in

your interactions on social media, you feel like you're "dwelling apart" or "abiding outside the camp", you might be willing to do anything to change that---you might even be willing to compromise your principles or values, or pretend to be someone that you're not. And there's another side to that as well. We can be victims in this all too common experience, but even worse, we can be the ones to cause others to feel excluded or not wanted.

In either case, we need to follow the example of the unnamed man with leprosy in today's Gospel. He felt excluded and unwanted in the most intense way, so he ran to Jesus! He didn't care that he was breaking the social customs or the religious prescriptions. He trusted that Jesus had the answer, and he didn't let anything keep him from doing whatever it took to have Jesus hear his plea.

And just as Jesus didn't let even the dreaded disease of leprosy keep Him from reaching out to the man in his need, there is nothing so bad in my life or any of your lives that would ever keep Jesus from doing the same to us---reaching out, in His compassionate and merciful Love, and healing us, and restoring to us our rightful place with Him, within the Body of Christ. Many of you have experienced Jesus' merciful Love in the Sacrament of Penance over these past 40 hours. If you did, thanks be to God! And don't ever let anything in your life keep you from running to Jesus in the Sacrament of Penance anytime you feel like you're outside His good graces. He will always say to you, as He said to the Leper: "I DO will you to be here with me. Be made clean."

The great Season of Grace and Mercy---the season of Lent---begins this week with Ash Wednesday, which as we know is a day of fast and abstinence (even though it's also Valentine's Day). It's also the day for us to make our Lenten resolutions regarding how we intend to deepen and strengthen our relationship with Jesus, and to more faithfully live our lives as His disciples.

I think today's Gospel provides us with the makings of a great resolution: to make sure that we never purposely "excommunicate" anyone from our circle of friends---that we make sure not to exclude anyone from our relationships as a way of exerting some kind of power or control. And a corollary to that resolution is to resolve to do everything you can to try to include those around you who clearly are being left out, even if you haven't caused it.

I think another wonderful resolution to consider is given to us by St. Paul in today's Second Reading from his first Letter to the Corinthians: "*Whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do,*

*do everything for the glory of God.*” We all have various reasons, or motives, for doing what we do---to make ourselves look better, or to get the attention of someone we want to impress, or to get better grades or advance our particular career choice. What St. Paul urges us is to do everything that we do as a way to impress God---to get His attention---and through the good deeds that we do, through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy that we choose to practice, through the ways we are obedient to our parents or to others in positions of authority in our lives----we should ultimately do what we’re doing because we know it’s the right thing to do, it’s what God knows will make us happy, and that’s what gives glory to God as we try to be joyful and faithful disciples of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today is the Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time, but February 11<sup>th</sup> is also the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. It was on this date in 1858 in Lourdes, France that our Blessed Mother appeared to a young 14-year old girl, Bernadette Soubirous, and did so on several more occasions, identifying herself during one of those apparitions as the Immaculate Conception. She urged Bernadette to tell people to turn away from sin, to pray the Rosary each day, and to follow her Son Jesus’ teachings in their lives.

Just like each of your good mothers and fathers, our Blessed Mother wants *only* what is for your good and your spiritual well-being. She wants *only* to help us to come to her Son, Jesus. She wants *nothing* for herself. Our prayers to her are for the purpose of her helping us to stay close to Jesus.

If you have a devotion already to our Blessed Mother, make it even stronger; if you don’t have one, make every effort to develop one through regular prayer. Our Blessed Mother will *never* ignore your prayers, and she will *always* lead you to Jesus.

You have been in Jesus’ **“Presence”** for these 40 hours of prayer, reflection and discussion with one another. Even though you are preparing to leave to return home to your regular schedules of school, homework, extra-curricular activities, and family life, Jesus’ Presence will remain with you as long as you keep doing what the brave man did in today’s Gospel--- just keep running to Jesus; don’t let anyone or anything keep you away---so that you can live in His abiding “Presence” throughout the rest of your life here on earth.

And then, when our lives in this world are ended, you and all of us, will look forward with great Hope to living in His **Presence** for all eternity in Heaven.

God bless you, now and always!