

Texts: Mark 1:40-45
6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
11 February 2018
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Twenty years ago, I spent the summer at language school in Monterey, California, learning Italian. Some of our Navy families know the place. Every morning before class, I'd go to a coffee shop, get an espresso, sit on the coffee shop patio and read my Italian Bible. Early on in the summer a woman stopped by my table and asked, "Are you reading the Bible?" We talked, and as she was about to go in to get her latte I stood up to shake her hand. She declined to shake my hand. "I'm sorry," she said, "I have a germ phobia." It was then I noticed the plastic bag in her hands, with her own fork and spoon and napkins for wiping off the table and chair where she would sit. Her name was June.

Every day that summer June would stop at my table, and as we talked I learned quite a lot about the troubles in her family. But, of course, we never touched. My last day in town that summer, when June stopped by my table, I stood up and handed her a book I'd bought her, wrapped in plastic, that I thought she might find helpful. June was so moved, she said, "I wish I could hug you. Oh maybe I can." Trembling, June reached over and gave me the slightest hug - a big step for a germ-phobic woman who couldn't shake my hand at the beginning of the summer.

It's been twenty years, but I've never forgotten June or that moment when she touched me. That summer I'd been very down on myself, feeling a failure as a priest and a human. When June touched me, I discovered something about myself. Maybe I wasn't such an awful human being after all. Maybe I had something to offer. And I like to think June discovered something about herself in that hug. Before June touched me, something - some power - had touched her heart to unleash the courage and potential she had in her to become the person God made her to be, set free from her fears, so that she would be the unclean outcast isolated from others no more.

In our Gospel story, the most remarkable thing Jesus does for the leper is to *touch him*, the man whose skin disease makes everyone consider him "untouchable", "unclean" - including the man himself. Jesus makes the man discover he is more than what other people make him to be, more than his own fears make him to be. Through the touch of Jesus, the leper discovers who he really is

and who he can be, set free from all that cast him out from himself. That's the real healing Jesus brings to him, apart from any physical healing.

That's the real healing Jesus brings us. All my adult life, men have told me who I should be and what I should do, from popes and bishops to fellow priests, co-workers, church members, even friends and family. Except for the *rare* occasion when someone actually seemed like Jesus was speaking to me through them, I'm quite sick of it. I believe in the Bible, when it says in the Book of Psalms, "Put not your trust in princes, in mortal men in whom there is no help." I want to live a life set free from all the people who want to define my life. I want instead to listen only to Jesus telling me who I should be, who I can be. I think that way of living is the healing Jesus is offering. You might find it healing too.