

+The most successful American spy during the Second World War was a woman, Mrs. Josephine Guerrero. She was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Catholic Citizens Award. Mrs. Guerrero volunteered to be a spy during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines.

She prowled restricted Japanese areas where no other spy would go. She once walked fifty miles through dozens of security checkpoints with a top-secret map taped to her back. She had more missions than any other American spy. Not once was she stopped, never searched. You see, Josephine Guerrero . . . was a leper.

No one would dare to touch a leper. That is probably still true today, as it was true in the Second World War, and it was especially true in Gospel times. But as we shall see, today, a different kind of leper.

In the first reading we heard how lepers lived in isolated colonies, completely exiled from society, shunned by everyone, including their own family. This fear of contamination reduced every leper to a dreaded medical horror. No one touched a leper.

The very word leper came to mean outcast. To make matters worse, the sickness came to be seen as divine punishment. The religious authorities suspected that they must have committed some kind of terrible sin to have caused his disease.

These poor folks have the disease and on top of that, they were considered to be very bad people. They had no hope of receiving love, no hope of being accepted as persons, no hope of enjoying ordinary human companionship.

No leper would ever have approached an orthodox rabbi, but the leper in this story approached Jesus confidently for help. This was exceptional, but even more exceptional was what followed: "Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him...." He could have done it from a distance, but he chose to physically touch him.

That touch healed him - healed his disease, yes, but healed also his feeling that he not only had a disease but was a disease; it healed his isolation, his loneliness, his despair, his belief that he was cursed by God.... This is the God revealed by Jesus, a "Father of Mercies."

Ironically, by touching the leper, Jesus would be deemed as unclean in the eyes of Levitical law. The leper broke the Law in approaching Jesus, and Jesus in turn broke through the Law to reach and touch the afflicted man. Jesus would then be considered as a sinner to be rejected.

"For our sake," wrote St Paul, "God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

We might look back at that time and see that bad news reigned over the good news. The bad news is that we would have to be good before we could approach the Lord. If so, sinners would not be allowed to be in the Cathedral – wonder what that would do to collections!

Not to worry, this is not the Gospel; it is the religion of the Pharisees. The good news is that we can approach the Lord no matter what our condition or circumstances. That is what the leper shows us.

The leper was suffering from two afflictions: First the physical disease of leprosy; And second, the loss of personal human dignity as an exile from society. It is debatable which was the greater burden.

Christ performed two miracles. Cleansing the leper from his leprosy was the second miracle. The first miracle was when Christ reached out and touched the leper, accepting him fully as a human person.

It is debatable which was the greater affliction. It is debatable which was the greater miracle. We cannot work the second miracle of physical healing. We can perform the first miracle. We can accept rejected people.

Leprosy is medically controlled today. Rejecting and dehumanizing people are not. In this sense, our age still has its lepers.

Yes, today there are a variety of modern lepers. For example, there are social lepers, people who are rejected because of physical defects, immigrants, disease, race, nerdy people, people bullied, unwanted pregnancy, debility of old age.

Most of us cannot work the miracle of restoring physical health. We can work the miracle of reaching out and changing the conditions offering the socially rejected their full human dignity.

There are also lepers of our own making. People whom we have rejected personally. Perhaps an annoying relative, a meddlesome in-law, a cranky neighbor, an irritable spouse, a troublesome child.

+When I was in college my biology professor assigned me my lab partner to a girl who had some language issues. I was like, "I'm struggling with the language of biology myself, no less translating it to English." You see, he saw one who was being isolated and sought to bring her in.

We all have such personal lepers in our own lives. They are not in physical exile. They are in personal exile. It is doubtful that we can perform the miracle of transforming unpleasant personalities or eliminating all human conflicts. But we can work the miracle of reaching out again, trying again, to accept them. Those moments when we see them coming our way and we do not cross the street but brace for them and engage them.

Our lack of concern for the rejected is our own loss. Those who shunned World War II spy Josephine Guerrero were actually contributing to their own downfall.

The people in the biblical times who were unwilling to see the human needs of lepers punished themselves, failing to see the good as they put up labels.

And when we reject the socially unacceptable or create our own personal lepers, we diminish our own lives by rejecting what they offer to enrich us.

Christ worked two miracles when he reached out and touched the leper. Most likely, we cannot perform the second miracle of physical healing. We can perform the first miracle of restoring human dignity.

We can accept rejected people. We can cure modern leprosy. We can be the Face of the God of Mercy.