Leprosy is a general term that covered a wide variety of chronic skin diseases. In a Mediterranean climate like that of Israel/Palestine, these diseases, if untreated, could be quite distressful. Such a physical condition caused the skin to be broken and bodily fluids to exude. For this reason, those suffering from such ailments were deemed unclean. They were banished from the community, and were required to keep their distance from others. The issue here was bodily boundaries not physical hygiene. Since bodily fluids belonged within the body, emissions other than the normal functions of elimination were clearly out of place.

The very state of being unclean, not merely the physical condition itself, was thought to be contagious. Anyone who had direct contact with someone or something that was unclean was also considered unclean. This is why those afflicted were required to warn anyone who might unknowingly approach them with the cry, "Unclean! Unclean!" (Mark 1:44). It is clear that the real tragedy of such an affliction was less the physical discomfort that the person had to endure than the social estrangement and the religious or ritual alienation that was imposed because of it.

Finally, since such social and religious alienation was so severe, it was believed that the condition was brought on by some kind of sin (Num 12:9-10). This made the one with leprosy not only physically loathsome and socially dangerous, but morally reprehensible as well.

Today we might consider such attitudes primitive, stemming from ignorance, and unacceptable. However, we still often exclude people from our inner circles because of some physical, psychological, or mental condition – thus adding to the burden they carry. We pass by them on the streets of our cities; many of them are relegated to shelters that are not safe; we ignore them when they panhandle outside corner pharmacies. We are not so different than were the respectable people of biblical times.

However, such societal alienation is a very complex issue. We can’t simply take the homeless into our homes, nor kiss the leper as Francis did. It is a fact that despite our desire to help, do-gooders do not always do good. So, how might we show these sisters and brothers of ours the respect and concern they deserve?

First we must admit our own tendency to marginalize people because of physical, psychological, or mental limitations. How can we hope to help the stranger who carries such burdens when
we push away those within our families, work or church communities, or circles of friends who might be so afflicted?

The word that Mark used (v.41) that we translate ‘pity’ (splánchnon) is a technical term for deep-seated inner passion. It corresponds with the divine mercy or ‘womb-love’ of God found in the Old Testament (Exod 34:6; Deut 4:31; Pss 78:38; 86:15; etc). In the New Testament synoptic tradition, such splánchnon is only found in Jesus. Yet we are called by Jesus (this is the second point) to show this deep-seated inner passion to others in need (the Good Samaritan; Luke 10:33). The mercy of God embraces all who have been born from the womb of God. As children of this merciful God, we too are called to embrace all with our respect and concern.

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