

## **"Eucharist: the Healing touch of Christ"**

Homily of February 16, 2003

by Fr. Gerry Murphy

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*Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him*

A few years ago Brenda Peterson wrote a book of essays entitled, *Nature and Other Mothers*. The first essay in the collection is curiously named, *In Praise of Skin*. In it, she vividly describes a time in her life when she was afflicted by very painful skin rashes. Desperate for relief, she tried every possible doctor and consultant but found no cure. Medication after medication, proved ineffective, and eventually the doctors ran out of ideas. The rash always returned.

One day her grandmother examined her and pronounced a more ancient and telling diagnoses: Skin needs to be touched! Her grandmother then began to give her regular skin massages and these did what the highly expensive medicines failed to do. They cured her.

How right Peterson's grandmother is: *Skin needs to be touched!*

Our first reading this morning from Leviticus outlines for us the harsh treatment meted out to those in ancient Israel who had any kind of skin disease or other serious disfigurements. Anyone with any kind of physical imperfection was clearly not as holy as the Lord is holy and should therefore be shunned. Let me just read for you the uncensored version of this morning's reading from Leviticus. It's a little more colorful, shall we say.

"For no one who has a blemish may draw near, a person blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or limb too long, or a person with an injured foot or an injured hand, or a dwarf, or a person with a defect in his or her sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles" (Lev 21, 16-20) Now that is what I call a sobering and painful thought! Anyway, none of these unfortunates, according to Levitical law can approach the Lord. Leviticus commands that the person afflicted with leprosy must "live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Lev 13:46). In other words, lepers and others with various disfigurements and skin diseases were considered unclean and untouchable. And how does Jesus respond to the leper in our gospel reading this morning? Well, in blatant defiance of Levitical law he reached out and touched the leper. And in doing so the disfigured man was healed. By touching the "leper" or the outcast as he was labeled, Jesus challenges his culture's judgment. In Jesus' view, the "leper's" problem is not contaminating, and with his touch he restores the leper to full membership in God's community, to solidarity in human fellowship. And with his touch

Jesus demonstrates for us the power of the human touch to heal.

Not only that, but Jesus himself continues to reach out and physically touch us in every Eucharistic communion. As humans, God knows that we need to see, feel and hear that we are loved, healed and forgiven. That is why Jesus becomes for us this Godly touch of love in every Eucharistic communion. And given the many moments of tension, loneliness and conflict we experience in our lives, we deeply need that touch.

The late novelist Andre Dubus, once wrote a very beautiful reflection on why he went to Eucharist frequently: *This morning I received the sacrament I still believe in: at seven-fifteen the priest elevated the host, then the chalice, and spoke the words of the ritual, and the bread became flesh, the wine became blood, and minutes later I placed on my tongue the taste of forgiveness and of love that affirmed, perhaps celebrated, my being alive, my being mortal. This has nothing to do with immorality, with eternity; I love the earth too much to contemplate a life apart from it, although I believe in that life. No, this has to do with mortality and the touch of flesh, and my belief in the sacrament of the Eucharist is simple: without touch, God is an idea, a philosophy; God must touch and be touched, the tongue on flesh. . .but in the instant of the touch there is no place for thinking, for talking, the silent touch affirms all that, and goes deeper: it affirms the mysteries of love and mortality.*

Jesus reached out and touched the leper, and in doing so this is what he has taught us: You can only heal the person you love. You can only love the person you know. And you can only know the person you touch.