

## 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday OT, C

Several years ago, a gentleman said to me, **“I just cannot get comfortable in my own skin.”** Then he went on to describe his life. He described comparison and competition with others to be enough. He spoke of expectations that he could never meet. He revealed that loneliness had isolated him within his family, among friends, and even at church. He was describing skin-level life. He was looking all around him, at the people and circumstances of his life, but he was either unwilling or unable to look within himself. He wanted what the nine lepers wanted. He wanted new skin, comfortable skin. He wanted to be accepted and approved of by others. He wanted the priests of his life – all those people to whom he gave power and authority over himself – to declare him to be clean, to be enough.

If today’s gospel statistics are any indication, then ninety percent of us live life at skin level. That is, we live on the surface. It is a **“what you see is what you get”** attitude. We assume there is nothing else. At the skin level, our view of life is mostly determined by whether life is going our way and whether we get what we want. Life is very much exteriorized. That is not to suggest that skin-level life is easy or pain-free. To the contrary, life at that level feels mostly like day-to-day survival, is rarely peaceful, and leaves us feeling as if something is missing. More than anything else, skin-level life seeks to be comfortable; physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, and financially. There is nothing wrong

with being comfortable, but it becomes a problem when we choose to settle for it rather than moving to a deeper place, a deeper way of seeing, relating, and living. Sometimes comfort can insulate us from the reality of life and the presence of God. It seems that only about ten percent, one in ten lepers, are willing to move in a new direction, to seek a wholeness that cannot be found in mere comfort.

For most of us, when life gets uncomfortable, when things do not go our way, and we do not get what we want or expect, then we begin seeking relief. We want the pain to stop and the situation to change or go away. Too often, we look for quick, easy solutions - something that will make us comfortable again, something that will allow us to return to life as it was before. That is the life of a leper. That is life at the skin level. One day, you are clean. Life is as expected. You have work, friends, and family. You are part of the faith community. The next day, everything changes. The next day, you are unclean.

For the ten lepers in today's gospel, that means no family, no friends except each other, no work, no temple. They were physically shunned, excluded. They were kept at the farthest edges of society. They had to wear shabby rags for clothes. Their hair was to be a mess and left uncombed. If anyone approached too closely, the leper was required to cry out, "**Unclean, unclean.**" That's how it is when you are a leper. They want to return to the way things were before, when they were clean, but they would settle for comfort. From a distance, they cry out, "**Jesus,**

**Master! Have pity on us!”** We can only imagine what they wanted. Maybe they hoped for a piece of bread, some water, and a blanket. Perhaps they just wanted to hear a kind word. Maybe they wanted to be seen and, if only for a moment, feel real, feel alive, feel like a human being. There is nothing comfortable about their lives. At the skin level, each day of life is spent searching for some relief. I know that search, and I will bet you do too.

Regardless of our skin condition, we know what it is like to be a leper. We may not have lived under the same conditions as the lepers of Jesus’ time, but we could each tell a story about a time when we could not get comfortable in our own skin. That is the leprosy of today. Today’s leprosy is not a medical condition or a legal status. It is, instead, a spiritual condition. It is leprosy of the heart. Its symptoms have nothing to do with our skin. Instead, they include traits such as perfectionism, gluttony, sadness, anger, pride, boredom, gossip, the need for control or approval, fear, judgmentalness, restlessness, excessive busyness, grudges, prejudice, jealousy, condemnation, indifference, and addiction. Leprosy distorts our perception of and relationship with God, the world, others, and even ourselves. Leprosy keeps life at a superficial level. These symptoms, what the early church mothers and fathers called **“passions,”** reveal a deep discomfort. As long as we deal with them at the level of the skin, seeking cleanliness rather than wholeness, we can never truly be made whole.

Leprosy even convinces us that the most we can hope for is a declaration of cleanness. So, we settle for being comfortable rather than being changed. We seek relief rather than wholeness. We desire something from Jesus more than we desire Jesus himself. That is life at the skin-level. That is where we tend to live. It is where the lepers in today's gospel have lived. Nine of the ten lepers will settle for a declaration of cleanness. But there is always that one, that one who can look below the surface, to see more than new skin. One leper, the Samaritan, looks past the exterior illusions of new skin. He sees a deeper reality and understands that healing is an interior condition. It is about the heart more than the skin. If he wants the healing and wholeness that Jesus offers, he will have to turn around and go in a direction different from the other nine. And he does.

While nine lepers celebrate new skin, one leper celebrates the creator and restorer of new skin. While nine lepers hear the priests say, **“You are clean,”** one leper hears the God-Man say, **“Stand up and go; your faith has saved you.”**

If today's gospel statistics are any indication, then ninety percent of us live life at skin level. Jesus offers more. He desires more for us than we often hope for ourselves, what Jesus does for the one he offers to all. **“Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”** It is not a rebuke. It is an invitation. **Amen.**