

Mark 1:40-45 Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Do we choose to make life better for others?

How many times have we heard or said the phrase, “If you **really** love me, you will “**dot. dot. dot.**” feel free to fill in the blank with whatever you like. When we have a close connection with someone we love or with someone we believe loves us, it makes our asking for something so much easier. That does not necessarily mean we will get everything that we want, but it does mean that we may feel more confident that the person will **at least** listen to what we have to say. And I think it is safe to say that if **we love** the person who is doing the asking, **there** is a good chance that **we are** more than willing to hear their request.

Let me tell you a story. When my son Ricky was a little boy he had a Teddy Bear he named “Teddy”. Ricky carried Teddy everywhere he went. There was no toy or stuffed animal that even came close to Teddy’s status in my son’s heart.

Now when my children were young, every so often I would pack them up and off we would go to visit my mother in Long Island. **Naturally**, she would spoil all of us rotten the whole time we were with her. When our mini-vacation was over and it was time to go back home, the return trip always began with a long, sad, and tearful goodbye. But being good travelers, by the time we reached Queens the kids

would have settled down and they nestled themselves in the back seat for a long nap.

This one time, just as we got into Brooklyn, Ricky who was about 4 or 5 jumped up and cried, “Mama, Teddy is not here!!! We have to go back.” After some searching my daughter Genny chimed in, “Ma, I think he must be back at Grandma’s!” I calmly said to Ricky, “Not to worry, Grandma will mail Teddy to you right away.” Ricky looked at me with these big, brown, tear- filled eyes and said, “But Mama, its Teddy.”

Well, I made a u-turn, drove back through Brooklyn, down the Belt Parkway in Queens, across the Southern State Parkway and a short hour and a half later we were finally back at Grandma’s house. We rushed in startling my mother who is could not imagine what happened!!! A manhunt began for Teddy who was found behind the sofa next to my sister’s dog who definitely had a guilty look on his face. We said goodbye once again, this time it was quick with no tears, and we were off to Maryland. After a while I looked in the rear-view mirror and Teddy was snug in the back seat tightly held by his sleeping owner. When I told my husband what happened he could not believe I turned back to get this stuffed animal, but I had no doubt that he would have done the same thing.

Believe me when I say I am not comparing a man with leprosy with a child who forgot a teddy bear. But what I am comparing is the feeling of safety and

approachability. Ricky is my son and he knows the he can ask me anything. There were times when I said yes and there were lots of times when the answer was no, but I know that he never felt that could not come to me or his father with any question or problem.

Now I doubt that the leper in this story knew Jesus all that well. But I am sure that he heard not only the rumors of his healing powers, but he must have also heard of Jesus' compassionate heart. Remember that being a leper meant you were an outcast who was feared by all the townspeople because leprosy was highly contagious. People would throw stones at lepers who came into the city and would do anything they could to make these frightening intruders go away. We have no idea if this leper was a good man or a bad man; if he was rich or poor; if he had a family or was alone in the world. None of that mattered because once the person was infected that was the only thing people saw. So this man took a big risk coming into the city to find this miraculous healer. When he saw Jesus he fell on his knees and said, "if you want to you can make me clean." Our Lord did not know this man, but was moved to pity. Jesus knew the risk this man took to find Him. Jesus not only cured him, He stretched out His hand and touched him. After being shunned by so many people, imagine how this leprous outcast must have felt having this stranger disregard this highly dreaded disease and purposefully come in

direct contact with him. Jesus had no concern for himself or what others thought. His focus was on this man who took a risk and came begging for a miracle.

Jesus cured this man, but do not overlook or underestimate the man's **effort** in finding and trusting Our Lord.

Now let's take a closer look at our own relationship with God and what we feel we can ask. We all have a bit of leprosy. We might not be afflicted with a malady that is physically eating away our body, but what may be worse, we may be suffering from something that may be systematically destroying our hearts or souls. We may be suffering from the disease of bitterness, anger, envy, or despair. Our disfigurement might not be seen by the outside world but it might be even deadlier if it eats away our peace and well-being.

We have all often been told that God will always give us the strength to overcome anything, but those are empty words if we have not developed a connection with the Almighty. God's touch is there for the taking, but **we** also have to extend our hands. Every one of us needs to develop our own personal and authentic relationship, or the trust that allows us to pray about our vulnerabilities will never happen. The leper in the story made a **tremendous** effort to seek out Christ. Unfortunately I do not think the gospels make that fact clear enough. What kind of effort do we make to present to God our deepest scars? God is not asking us to beg, God is asking us to trust.

Jesus' hand is always outstretched waiting and wanting to heal whatever is eating away our hearts. Those who feel confident to unlock their needs and desires are the ones who have taken the time to talk to God about their life, their dreams, and their disappointments. And it also means that have spent time being quiet and listening to God.

If we have an honest and sincere relationship it also means that we are able to accept whatever answer we are given; God loves us whether the answer to our prayers is a yes or a no. So the question we have to ask ourselves is not does God love us, but rather do we love God enough to accept **whatever** answer we are given. Do we still love God when the answer to our prayers is no?

Be assured that unlike this determined leper who had to fight crowds to get close to Christ, Christ is always present for us. We are blessed that we know we can ask God for anything, anytime, anywhere. Pray often...not necessarily formal prayers, but just an ordinary conversation with someone who loves us very much. Let us give praise and thanksgivings for gifts received, and let us pray for acceptance for those requests denied. But no matter what, pray to Our God whose love for us is **strong**, is **real**, and is **everlasting**.

Amen