

Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time
February 10 & 11, 2018

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I entered the formation program of the Sisters of St. Francis in 1968 and was assigned a roommate. When I saw who I was bunking with I thought: "Of all the women in this group of 13, why did I get stuck with this Puerto Rican?" I am ashamed to say that this is the prejudice my sheltered environment had caused. We became the best of friends and still are today, but little by little I have uncovered other far more subtle prejudices within myself.

One of the best TED talks I have ever heard is called "The Danger of a Single Story," by novelist Chimamanda Adichie. She speaks of the untrue, limited perspective, incomplete story presented by stereotypes. Chimamanda says: "When we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise." In 1968, I had one story about a dark skinned roommate who spoke Spanish and was louder than I was, ...cuter too.

Over the course of history civilization has carried one story about various peoples. Since this is Black History month, let us recall how one story was told about those who were taken from their home country in various parts of Africa. Our brothers and sisters were made slaves because others told an untrue story about them. Some people in the United States saw how unjust the treatment of our brothers and sisters was because of this stereotype and began to help them. These people were called Abolitionists. Now some of the Abolitionists assisted with the "Underground Railroad," hiding places that stretched from the South to the North.

In the summer of 1973, I lived in an old farm house in Fort Plain which had a trap door in the floor of the second floor bathroom which led to a set of stairs that emptied across from the back door. There are many such places throughout Upstate New York but we have forgotten their importance. We have been very efficient in tearing down most of the structures in Syracuse that had significance to the Underground Railroad. A Rite Aid was built on the site where Loguen sheltered the freedom seekers. The jail house that Syracuse residents stormed to

free William Jerry Henry is a parking lot. The Oswego farmhouse and barn where Edwin and Charlotte Clark had at least 125 runaway slaves is gone. Don't we need to remind ourselves of the sin of the past or are we too indifferent to our own walls, our racism, sexism, consumerism, and all the other "isms."

Justice Thurgood Marshall, the 1st African American to hold a seat on the Supreme Court and who worked for desegregation once said: "I wish I could say that racism and prejudice were only distant memories. We must dissent from indifference. We must dissent from apathy. We must dissent from the fear, the hatred and the mistrust... we must dissent because America can do better, because America has no choice but to do better."

What does this have to do with today's readings? Paul tells us: "Do no offense.... Not to a Jew, not to a Greek," which were his opposing groups. Today, he'd say: "Do no offense to any brother or sister. Don't seek your own glory, seek God's. How? Imitate Christ."

So what is Christ doing that we should imitate? He is breaking boundaries. The person with leprosy was despicable to society. If you touched one you became unclean, unable to enter the temple again, unable to worship. Ostracized! Jesus sneered at such inhumanity. The leprous person said: "If you are willing, you can heal me." Jesus in effect says, "Of course I am willing."

And Jesus touched him. Jesus tells him to go to the priest like the law prescribes because that is the only way the man will be welcomed back into society. And though the healed person was told: "Not a word to anyone", we can understand his joy and exuberance as his life was given back to him.

The leper had a skin condition that was recognizable. Since it was obvious he could not hide it. We are quite adept at hiding our weakness, our ugliness, our sinfulness. We sometimes hide our "isms" from ourselves.

Lent starts this Wednesday. It is a very good time to re-echo the words of this brief conversation between Jesus and the person in need of healing. Each week of Lent is an opportunity for us to go deeper to look at our genuine self. It takes courage and vulnerability to place our true self before God.

Let us in these holy days ahead pray for a change in our entitled lifestyle if that is where we need healing. Perhaps it's in our prejudices and perspectives that are so limiting and which steal life from others. If it's a controlling or abusive nature, a fearful or judgmental nature... we all have scabs that need to be healed. We cannot begin to pray that the ills of society be remedied until we bring ourselves before Christ saying: If you are willing, you can heal me. Only then will Easter be the acknowledgement that Jesus was indeed willing and we are cleansed.