

I wonder what was worse about leprosy, having the disease or having people treat you with disgust.

The Book of Leviticus considered almost any skin problem to be leprosy, whether it was a scab, a pustule or even a blotch. People didn't understand what was contagious and what was not. The bacterium that causes leprosy wasn't discovered until 1871. Prior to that time, lepers were sent off to colonies like the one at Molokai in Hawaii. Since that time, treatment has become more humane.

But in the Old Testament, skin diseases scared people. Sick men had to tear their garments, remove their hats and cover their beard. They had to warn passersby that they were unclean. They were treated with disgust, but apparently they complied with these rules because of the fear of contagion.

The regulations for leprosy made the healthy feel secure by pushing away the sick, and it made the sick feel even more ostracized.

Today there are still classes of people who feel like American society does not treat them humanely; for example, the disabled, prisoners and persons of color.

In recent years we have improved handicap accessibility in our country, but there are still places where a person in a wheelchair will feel less welcome. Even in our parish facilities the disabled cannot gain easy access to places like the confessional in St. Munchin's, my office in the rectory, any classroom in St. Rita's, or the church and restroom in Maysville.

The prisoners here at Missouri Western Correctional Center often feel like they are treated poorly. They live apart from others, they are given simple clothing to wear, they sleep in summer without air conditioning, and they wear ID badges that carry in big letters the word OFFENDER. They've been found guilty, so punishment is appropriate. But some prisoners complain about personnel, family, friends and strangers who treat them without human respect. Many have a hard time going back to society because people won't give ex-cons a chance.

Persons of color also feel that society sets them apart. If they walk down the street, stroll through a store, or just drive a car, white people are suspicious of them and fearful.

We don't have to treat anybody the way we used to treat lepers. People are people, and we are called continuously to integrate all people into a common society.

I got the car I'm driving now about 6 years ago. It doesn't weigh as much as the one I had before. The day I drove it home from the dealership was a day like today, just enough snow and ice on the ground to be dangerous. The drive home was only about 3 miles, but when I turned the car up the street where I lived, it took a bad turn on the unplowed road and nearly crashed into a utility pole – I almost wrecked a brand new car. I started wondering if I'd chosen the right vehicle: "What have I done now?" It's a question we naturally ask after we've bought a new car, moved into a new house, gotten engaged, signed up for college or accepted a new job. A little apprehension may accompany a big decision.

In today's first reading, Abram had to make a decision about going where God was directing him. Abram came from Ur, a city that sits in modern-day Iraq. God invited him to leave there and go to the land that became known as Israel. There God promised to increase Abram's descendants. Abram had to leave what was comfortable and go to a place he did not know, trusting in God's promise. It paid off, but I'm sure Abram wondered at the start of his journey, "What have I done now?"

Today we celebrate with eight catechumens taking an important step on their journey toward baptism. There will be days when Ron, Randy, Robin, Morgan, Adam, Sherry, Aubrey, and Megan may wonder, "What have I done now?" But eventually, like Abram, they will come to experience the full joy of God's promise.

On a beautiful day, when I put the top down on my little convertible, I know why I thought it was a good idea to buy that car. Snowy days still scare me a bit. I'm convinced one of these winter days my car will be tooling down the road and will suddenly end up in a ditch. But as one of our members told me, "Whenever it happens, there'll be a farmer there to pull you out." They're probably right.

Whenever our faith hits snowy weather, whenever we aren't sure about the road we're on or the stability of our belief, there'll be someone there to help us, someone ready to pull us out and put us back on our feet. That someone is one in whom these catechumens place their trust today: Jesus Christ.