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For our homily today, I would like to place before us three people: A leper, a lawyer, and a lover.

First, the leper. I think we are all pretty familiar with the leper in the Gospel today. No matter which gospel writer presents him we know the lepers as ones whose disease alienates them from the rest of the society, forcing them to live in isolation. This has to be hard: Having a condition that removes you from other people. In so many ways we all have one sort of leprosy or another, don't we?

Each of us struggles at different times in our lives with the different conditions of our lives that separate us from others. Maybe even from ourselves. I think of my time working in high schools where our young people would self-select who could be in their group or not. I would often ask students why they are not hanging out with their friends any longer or why they don't ask a student from a certain group if they could join them at the lunch table or for some weekend fun. You could imagine the answers: "I just don't feel like it." "O, come on Father, they would never accept me."

When I would probe why a certain student didn't feel like connecting—or risking to connect with other students, often it was a classic condition of little to no confidence. More directly, that student just didn't feel worthy of the affiliation of another. It is as if the dreaded teenage acne was growing on their soul and they themselves were treating it like leprosy. We adults aren't so different.

Leprosy was a disease that made a person a non-person. It was a social way to deny the beauty of humanity. It was more of a social disease than a physical one. It was the social disease that said human dignity is only skin deep, not soul deep.

Church, I think that my young students—and the leper in today's gospel—can teach us all some important lessons. No matter how old we are or how good our skin is, we all are in need of some healing. Like the leper presented himself to Jesus to be healed, when we present ourselves to the Lord, which conditions do we ask be healed? Are there some zits on our souls that we let get in the way of our being fully alive? Is there a fledgling—or full-blown addiction that we need to present to Jesus? Are we able to name simply and boldly in prayer what we really pulls us down and makes us less of a person?

Second, the lawyer. Thursday we marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. I like the attention he's getting lately. As we consider a gospel today that calls us to make non-persons persons, I think it is more than appropriate that we give a nod to our nation's sixteenth president. His gospel-grounded Emancipation Proclamation is a highpoint in our nation's effort to declare that indeed all people are persons—that human dignity is never just skin deep.

Yet, there is a much less known trait of Lincoln's that bears mention today. His ability to reconcile peoples and reconcile himself with people. Often accused of not being aggressive enough with his adversaries, he once replied about the need to destroy enemies, though he did it with charity: "Am I not destroying my enemy when I make him my friend?" he responded.¹

Today's gospel calls us never to diminish the personhood—the humanity—of another. It is true that sometimes the pain our hurt and betrayal gets the best of us, and we choose death to a relationship instead of choosing life or at least life support. I think it possible that in the face of challenges and difficulties in relating, a person or colleague or classmate or in-law whom we just don't like can easily cease being a person who matters to us. Their offense could be leprous, and we are called to move toward healing, toward friendship, toward enemy-ending reconciliation and to be freed from the slavery of enmity.

Third. A lover. Yesterday, as we know all too well was Valentine's Day. I just happened to have a wedding. Yes, red hearts were everywhere. Watching Robin and John pray, exchange their vows, dance and laugh, and imagine their lives together was pretty beautiful. To be in the presence of lovers is a rather wonderful experience. There is a freshness, a lightness, an-everything-will-be-OK feeling to the world. Yes, Robin and John are lovers, but the love that I describe is romance on Day One of their marriage. I am wondering whether newly married people don't become *real* lovers until the days of their marriage advance along with the challenges of their marriage. Then, love is stronger than romance; it grows from it and returns back to it. I am wondering, after our nation's Hallmark-induced celebration of Valentine's Day, whether we confuse romance with love.

While I do think it is essential to be romantic, it is a non-negotiable to be a lover. The third voice of our homily today is the lover supreme: Jesus. And in the wake of yesterday's heart day, I would like to hold up that Jesus did the most loving thing for that sick leper. As it says in Mark's gospel, he stretched out his hand. That's what lovers do: They stretch out their hands. Sometimes those stretched out hands take someone to bed for love; other times it is to invite them to a party or a cafeteria table; and another time it might be a gesture of peace and reconciliation.

When the lover Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper, he just didn't heal him; he gave him life...actually he gave him his life back. That is what love does, at every turn: Love gives life.

Sometimes our hand is stretched out to keep people away from us. As we celebrate this Eucharist and experience God's hand reaching out to us to invite us to be fed on the love of his Son, to whom are we being called to reach out to and bring closer to ourselves.

¹ This reference comes from the pastoral letter of W. Francis Malooly, bishop of Wilmington, February 12, 2009.

Stretching is hard, especially stretching the muscle of hearts, that may be harden from hurt or bitterness.

May the example of a leper, a lawyer, and a lover, help us all to be lovers worth celebrating not with a red heart but with the body and blood given by our God whose sacred heart makes our lives so possible.