

In April of 1970, after a decade as the lead singer for the *Supremes*, Diana Ross released her first solo single titled 'Reach out and Touch (Somebody's Hand)'. Her version of the song, with a heavy Gospel influence, is one of the few of her songs expressing social conscience.

The song's sales weren't quite up to expectations - selling only half a million copies, and reaching only to the #20 spot on the pop charts.

Nonetheless, it became one of her most popular and notable songs - even performing it 38 years later as the finale for the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway.

In today's first reading, we hear in Leviticus the way to handle leprosy. A rather draconian way of dealing with disease. Yet for those living in the ancient world, the progression and treatment of leprosy was not known.

Leprosy was not like a head cold - rather, an infected person was stripped of all social status, lost their occupation, their home, their family ... they were no longer allowed near any people, and were to live outside the city. Those infected with leprosy were for all intents and purposes the living dead - nothing more than a walking corpse.

Such was the fear of this in ancient times - that without being a terminal illness, it virtually killed the life of the individual who had contracted it.

So much so that if an individual with leprosy, were to deviate from these norms and not live apart from society, it was quite normal to kill them by stoning them to death.

In the Gospel, a leper violates those norms, and approaches Jesus. Jesus has the right to start throwing rocks at this man - to begin his execution. Yet instead, Jesus touches the infected man, and the disease leaves him.

According to the Law of Moses, which we heard in the first reading, touching a leper makes one unclean. Yet when Jesus touches the leper, the disease is gone.

Jesus sends the man to the proper authorities - in order to allow him to rejoin normal society. Jesus has - in effect - given the man back his life.

But Jesus tells the man to “*tell no one anything.*” That is, to keep the means of his healing secret, but to do what was necessary to return to a normal way of life.

In the reading from St. Paul’s letters, he tells the Corinthians, and us as well:

*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*

In other words, that we should be imitators of Jesus.

Sadly, it is often easier to avoid the people who are lepers to us - whether that be someone who has offended us, or someone we may have offended. It is difficult in many ways to reach beyond the social stigmas of poverty, disease, or hatred ... in order to touch someone - to bring someone back into our lives or back into the life of society.

Or else, it is often easier to write a check, and think we have done it all.

Yet if we are to imitate Christ as we see him behaving in today’s Gospel, we must overcome our inner barriers, and reach out to those in need.

As we move closer to the Holy Season of Lent, let us pray that we might be the hands and the arms of Christ. Let us - in prayer - ask for guidance ... on how we are to be imitators of Christ Jesus ... and let us never tire of imitating Him ... who died for us and for our salvation.