

“The one who bears the sore of leprosy... shall cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’.” (Lv 13:44...45)

This week, I was lucky to see some of my favorite art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Fleeing the snowstorm, we went into the section dedicated to the art of Ancient Egypt. Amidst the mummies of dogs and cats and large sculpted stones stood an art form which I always find very moving: the beautiful, naturalistic portraits that later Egyptians placed on mummies. Have you ever seen any? These portraits made in delicate colored wax applied to a wooden board are so realistic they look like photographs of people who have been dead almost two thousand years. Their features are not ideal like Greek statues or the older, stylized mummies. You can see what these folks looked like in real life, with their hairdos, jewelry, clothes or facial hair. Through these portraits, another human being is reaching out to you in the beauty of their unique human face. Contemplating these faces stirs something deep in us, beyond the barriers of time and space, into the wonder of human relatedness.

What a tragedy, it is, therefore, when someone loses their face! That’s what happens when you get leprosy: it gnaws away at your features, like rain on a snowman, eating away at your nose, your lips, your eyelids, till your face is an awful molten mess. And though you may be the same inside, you lose your human figure. People shun you, run from you, stone you. In some parts of Madagascar, off the Southwest coast of Africa, lepers are still walled up alive today and fed through a hole, their faces never to be seen again. The very opposite of the beautiful Fayum mummy faces I was talking about a minute ago. Lepers lose their humanity.

Brothers and sisters, who are our lepers here and now? Who are the men and women we turn away from? Convicts and criminals? Drug addicts? The disabled? Those with dementia? The unwanted unborn? The homeless? Immigrants? Whose humanity are we denying? Which faces do not elicit in us that deep joy of human relatedness? I am sure that each and every one of us here is tempted, and probably guilty, of denying the humanity of someone else. Maybe in more subtle ways... Don’t we often throw verbal stones at those who vote differently from us, think or pray differently from us, or sin differently from us? We deny them their humanity.

Jesus, thank God, sees beyond appearances, moves beyond fear and rejection. Beyond the leper’s truly terrifying face, he sees a tender human heart. He sees someone who needs help, who yearns for a basic human relationship. Jesus does what the leper asks for; he makes him clean. Maybe the leper should also have asked for wisdom, because his blabbering, against Jesus’ command, now prevents the Savior from entering towns where he could heal more people. The leper was healed, but he didn’t become likeable or ideal in every respect. And so it goes with those we shun: the homeless you feed will get angry at you; a few of the immigrants you welcome might dabble in crime. But who among us doesn’t do dumb things

almost the very minute they walk out of the confessional? We sin and we're stupid; that's who we are. But that doesn't stop us from being loveable in God's eyes. We, too, are lepers in God's eyes: creatures made to be beautiful, but so likely to do dumb things and lose our being created in God's image and likeness. Aren't we blessed that we have such a Savior that he would approach us and love us, however much we have strayed and sinned?

Imagine the following scene: you're a kind of average person, beauty-wise. You're sitting in a park on a bench or at the mall on a couch, when suddenly, a top model comes and sits down next to you. You're kind of stunned that such a good-looking person would seek your company, when he or she strikes up a conversation. As the two of you get friendly, the top model looks at you with a warm smile and says, "You know what? I'm getting plastic surgery tomorrow. And I'm asking the surgeon to make me look like you, because I really like you." Now wait a minute! A top model wants to look like average old me, when I've been using all these beauty creams and gym memberships and stuff to look like a model—which, despite all my money and effort, is never going to happen anyway?

Brothers and sisters, this is the story of our salvation. The handsome top model who sits down next to us and wants to become like us is Jesus, the incarnate word of God. He wanted to become one of us because He loves us so much and wants to save us. In Paul's words, He was "not seeking his own benefit, but that of the many, that they may be saved." As He was hanging from the cross, Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's bitter prophecy: "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering, and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account." (Is 53:2b-3) God loves us so much that he became a faceless leper for us. He lost His beauty so that we could be saved, by confessing our own ugliness and by acknowledging the beauty in others.

"If you wish, Lord, you can make me clean!" May the Lord make this cry well up in us, that we may cry for joy when we hear His sweet reply: "I do will it, my beloved child. Be made clean." "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

Fr. Nicolas Steeves, SJ
Visiting priest