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-- There's been a lot in the news about the reappearance of measles this winter after its virtual eradication a number of years ago. Measles are known to be very contagious, and there's a lot of debate about whether parents should be able to keep their children from getting vaccinated.

-- Many diseases were thought to be contagious in Jesus' day. That included diseases of the skin, which were lumped under the term leprosy. Most of these were not the classic Hansen's disease, but often other skin diseases such as severe psoriasis.

-- In fact these are not very contagious, and neither is leprosy. While I was in Zimbabwe in 1985, I shook hands with a leper. That was hardly a heroic move, and nothing like Jesus taking the leper's hand in our gospel.

-- For a person declared a leper was not only physically isolated, but religiously as well. He or she could not take part in worship until declared clean. A person who touched them would become ritually unclean for a period of time. Our first reading is only a short portion of the rules in Leviticus for dealing with lepers and those with skin diseases.

-- Jesus was not afraid to touch him. In fact, he was deeply moved by the man. That gets missed in our translation. It wasn't just a detached pity Jesus felt. He felt the man's pain in his own gut, so to speak.

-- And the healing he gave him wasn't just physical, though that was part of it. He made this man whole...he restored him to his family and community...he made it possible for him to participate in worship and the life of his people.

-- We may not have a lot of people around us with Hansen's disease. But we have our own type of lepers. They may include the old confined to nursing homes, people with AIDS, those who are gay, those who

have failed in their marriages, those whose religious beliefs we hold suspect.

-- You could add your own examples from situations you encounter. The important point is that Jesus cares deeply about all of them. He reaches out to the neglected, the unclean of our society.

-- So the question confronts us: Are we willing to reach out to those who are regarded, in one way or another, as unclean? Are we willing to offer more than our pity? Will we be moved to minister to them, to offer them our time and assistance?

-- It was not a big challenge for me to touch a leper. But I find it a much greater challenge to reach out to someone who is a modern leper in society with my time and effort.

-- But that is what I am challenged to do. That is what we are all challenged to do as well.