For each of us there are those people who stand out in our memory not so much for what they do as for who they are. Unpretentious, they are simply so real, we cannot help but love them and find them wonderful role models for ourselves and for those around us. They can be members of our family, or they can be simply someone who has come into our lives in only the most casual way.

For me, we find these people in the Scriptures, generally unnamed, who can catch our attention and win our love. Today we meet one of them - a leper, unnamed and suffering the extreme isolation that was prescribed for them: what we just heard in the reading from the Book of Leviticus: “The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard; he shall cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’ ‘He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp.”

In today’s gospel, Mark presents this leper coming to Jesus out of his abandonment, his legal and social isolation, with the simple statement: “If you wish, you can make me clean!” With a compassion that is truly divine, Jesus immediately senses the faith and courage of the man and, breaking through all that the law forbids, reaches out, touches the leper and says simply: “I do will it. Be made clean.”

Two lessons for us: the faith and courage of the leper that led him to make his startling request, and the compassion of Jesus in His immediate reaction and healing. We all want healing for whatever brings painful isolation into our own life or in the life of those we love, but do we have the selfless, simple courage of the leper trustfully to seek the healing with an unquestioning faith? Or, when confronted with the lepers in our own lives, do we have the compassionate love of Christ to respond in offering whatever degree of healing we can?

The world continues to put those in need in some form of isolation. There may not be legal mandates or religious proscriptions, but there is a certain culture of indifference that makes it necessary for those in need to be left in that need until someone courageously comes to their rescue. Meeting needs is still not accepted as a necessary ingredient of good government or an accepted way of life for a people – a nation.

As individuals we may be bombarded with requests for assistance, and we learn that official efforts to provide regular assistance frequently, if not generally, come only with the consummate efforts of patrons or heroic benefactors – a Damien of Molokai or a Theresa of Calcutta. It is still not part of our culture for governments or peoples to reach out, as Jesus did, to offer whatever healing is necessary. That responding touching of the leper is, too often, something that will occur only when it has been begged for.
Jesus’ touch enabled the leper to return to society and be able to see to his own needs and the needs of those around him. It is very likely that people like the gospel leper probably became disciples of Jesus. As disciples of Jesus they had wonderful motivation to follow Jesus’ mandate to find Him in all the needy – and to care for them as they would for Him.

Jesus sent the cured leper to follow the official notification of a cure; “Go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them.” The official notification of a cure in our time is in the response to our pastoral care. Our compassion begins the healing, letting those in need know that Christ’s love for them is active in us, motivating us to reach out. Pope Francis has called for this proof again and again and hopefully the world is beginning to respond.

St. Louis parish has many proofs of response: our weekly tithe, the efforts of Saints Place and Elizabeth Ministry, the support of the Holy Father in what we call Peter’s Pence, our support of Catholic Charities, of Father Rick in Haiti and of our participation in RAIHN and its care for the homeless. These efforts cannot be simply occasional nods or even significant gifts; they must be seen as expressions of the life blood of our parish community. It must be the norm for our personal lives as we find the Christ in the least of His brothers and sisters.

Lent begins in a few days. As a faith community, as a parish, may we come ever closer to reaching out to the leper of our own experience. We must, as a parish, reach out to the Christ in those in need of healing. Mother Theresa commented that she could not touch the Christ in others until she had first touched Him in the Eucharist. Her tireless effort to offer a compassionate touch the poor came from the fire of her daily participation in the Eucharist.

The change in the leper is astounding at every level. Equally dramatic, however, is the change that is possible for our society if we simply practice the faith with which the Lord has gifted us. We must allow the healing Christ to touch us in our leprosy. Lent should find us following the healing Messiah even as He goes to His death and resurrection to heal us all.