**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**Have you ever felt yourself to be a leper? In Jesus’ time, a leper not only suffered a horribly disfiguring, often fatal, disease, but was banished as an outcast, totally ostracized from society, and considered steeped in sin. He could not approach within six feet of any person, including members of his own family. He could not live within the walls of the city; his dwelling had to be outside the city gates. The leper had to totally degrade himself, according to Leviticus 13:45: “His clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, “Unclean! Unclean!”**

**Imagine, if you will, the anguish, the heartbreak, the despondency of these ten lepers who approach Jesus, screaming out in their total physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual agony, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”**

**Again, I ask you, “Have you ever felt yourself to be a leper”? I have! I hesitate telling the story because it re-opens some old wounds, but, if nothing else, it will help you to understand why I can’t stop praising His Name, Jesus.**

**I was only about 31 years old, more than half of my lifetime ago. I was a young priest, only three years ordained, and found myself in an absolutely impossible situation, abandoned and slandered by people I thought were my friends. I was crushed. I started crying and couldn’t stop. I didn’t know where to turn. Finally, I called a friend, a woman religious who was a psychologist, and said through my tears, “Ellen, there’s a banner hanging on my wall that says, “When you’ve reached the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on”. Ellen, I’m slipping.”**

**After an hour or so, priest classmates started arriving and attempted to comfort and console me, but I couldn’t stop crying. Some prayed for me. Others wept with me. One then thought some off-color jokes would jolly me out of my pain. But, nothing they did or said could stem the flow of tears. I was a totally broken man.**

**Shortly thereafter, I asked to be transferred. After mocking me and practically calling me a traitor, the chancellor sent me to a parish where the pastor was a full-blown alcoholic. It was then that I cried out with the lepers, “Jesus, Master, have pity on me!”**

**In the time I was in that parish, I felt myself to be an absolutely miserable person. Yet, after Mass, people kept coming up to me and saying things like, “It’s so great having a happy, young priest in the parish. Thank you for being here.” Happy! I was miserable! I thought, “Am I that big a phony that they think I’m happy?”**

**Yet, throughout the year-and-a-half ministry there, I probably preached the best sermons of my life. I just couldn’t stop praising His Name. It was only much later in life, I realized when there was nothing of Victor left, it was Jesus Himself ministering to His people through me.**

**My ministry in that parish ended with an accident that caused the tumors in my leg to explode with such incredible pain that I wound up in the hospital enduring six surgeries. After one of the surgeries that left me with such screaming pain that even my face was terribly distorted with agony, a priest-friend came by and asked how I could endure it. I said, “It got me out of the horror of the rectory I was living in. I can take this pain. I couldn’t take that.”**

**It was in the midst of these surgeries that I made my first Ignatian Retreat for 30 days, and truly came to know that Jesus is my Lord and Savior. I came to see that He journeyed with me through all those years of spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical brokenness and healed me on the journey in such a way that I know it was Him. Jesus had indeed heard my cry and taken pity on me.**

**That’s why I can’t stop praising His Name, Jesus. He is the best thing that ever happened to me. You don’t know and I don’t have time to tell it all—all that He’s done for me. But He’s given me victory after victory. Yes, Jesus is the best thing that ever happened to me. That’s why you’ll never get me to stop shouting, THANK YOU, JESUS!**

**Now, I tell you all this because I know that I am not the only one here who has felt like a leper. Many of you have reached that same level of desperation that these men with leprosy reached from a variety of causes. I know there are parents in our parish who are desperate over their inability to reach a son or a daughter with an alcohol or drug problem. I know there are couples in this parish who are desperately trying to save their marriages that seem to be falling apart. I know there are members of our parish who are overwhelmed by cancers, heart disease, and diabetes, and their treatments. I know there’s a whole mess of people in this church, crying out with those ten lepers, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us”!**

**I am here to tell you, the Lord Himself has raised me up again and again and again, so that I might be a witness for Him. HE HEARS YOUR CRY!**

**That one leper who returns to Jesus and falls at his feet, glorifying God is told by Jesus, “Stand up and go; your faith has saved you.”**

**You see, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, healing faith is the conviction that even though our circumstances are desperate, there is a loving God who watches over us and if we will trust Him, healing will come. It may not come as quickly as you want. It may not even come in the way you want, but if you are faithful, you will see the salvation of our God.**

**This, my Friends, is a statement of mature faith. How many times have you looked back over your life and realized that situations you thought were hopeless were not hopeless at all? Even though you could not see a solution at the time, life worked out and you realize now that God used that supposedly hopeless situation in a wonderful way to make you are what you are today. With the help of God, your mess became a masterpiece. Your burden became a blessing. You thought you were at the end of your rope, but you were only at the beginning of a new reality.**

**I AM A WITNESS! I AM A WITNESS! THANK YOU, JESUS! THANK YOU, JESUS! THANK YOU, JESUS!**