

This is Molokai

The Molokai of St. Damien was a dumping ground for over 100 years for those who suffered from leprosy. Lepers were literally thrown over the side of the boat and left to either reach hell on earth or drown in the process. Today however, Hansen's disease is on the decline and lepers in Hawaii are no longer banished and forgotten. But we still have a type of leprosy here, a type of banishment and a unique kind of loneliness that one can feel while surrounded by a crowd. Spiritual leprosy is always more dreadful.....

There are two things I have always tried to avoid as a teacher as a man. First, I don't ever want to be overly compassionate to the point where I excuse bad behavior of my students or loved ones because they are suffering and having to work harder than others. I always felt that it would be a dis-service to the dignity of the person to "baby them" in this way. In fact when I coached football if a player was hurt he was still expected to play unless of course it was an injury. In that case he needed to sit out and let his injury heal. But we made that distinction between pain and injury. The second thing I have always tried to avoid is being melodramatic in how I see life. It bothers me when our culture sensationalizes reality to the point of distortion. For example when the Holocaust or slavery are used for political purposes to describe any kind of political injustice. It usually cheapens the meaning of the word and the utter horror of the seminal event.

With those two points being said, I believe this is Molokai. We are an island of suffering and sin. Collectively, we have leprosy. No one is immune and no one gets off the island without daily contact with all the lepers that swarm through the halls and in the classes and yes, the teacher's lounge. A brief respite is offered in the winter and spring but for the most part we are surrounded by death, suicide, sexual violence, divorce, unhealthy living arrangements, disease, medical problems, alcohol and drug addictions, those who struggle with self-image and fatherless boys destined for perpetual adolescence. This is true. It's not overly dramatic or overly compassionate to see and acknowledge this disease. What is also true is that we can ignore it and avoid it. I know because that is what I have done for more than ten years.

Four things happened to enlighten my heart and mind.

The first happened when I took over campus ministry. With that came the responsibility of having forty or more eighteen year old guys come together on Kairos retreats to spill out their deepest darkest struggles, sins and failures over the course of four days on a desolate mountain top. As campus minister, the first sense of duty was to make sure Kairos stayed Kairos. I took seriously, the responsibility to make sure that the process allowed them that sense of trust and comfort around each other. Kairos has

always been the most intense, most spiritual dynamic that the school offers. The first year I led five of these four day retreats. The next year I led two.

Though the retreat is for the students' spiritual growth, adult leaders enter into the student's experience to a certain degree. I will never forget sitting in a candle lit room. It was around two am. I was sitting in a circle next to one of my favorite students as he revealed a domestic abuse situation that he and his mother had endured from his own father. It was the most heart wrenching story I ever heard. Tears are gushing out, practically sobbing, he unloaded this weight and I remember that weight passed on to all of us in that room. As it pushed out my own tears, they dropped one by one on to the carpet below. This is what Kairos is all about- this intense unloading and God's presence and support that follows from peers who know. Those peers, we call 'the eighth sacrament'.

The second thing that opened my eyes to Molokai around us was my first year when we had a guest speaker, Justin Fatica from Hard As Nails Ministry come to Damien to speak and present an assembly titled, 'I Am Amazing!' The point Justin made was that inspite of the drama that surrounds us we will always retain the spiritual character of Baptism as 'God's own kid' as he put it. This October day that Justin came happened to be the day we were playing Bishop Amat It was surreal how the day unfolded. We began with morning Mass for the varsity football players. As we were coming out of Mass we noticed that someone had put a giant blue 'A' on Damien hill located just off campus. The message was clear, Amat was already claiming victory by planting that letter on our turf. I remember our stud linebacker getting in his car after the bell already rang. Several other football players piled in and I stopped the car asking what they were doing. "Sir, we have to get that A down'. I tried to stop them but later found out they were given permission. The next thing we know the A is in our quad and we are looking for gasoline, or a chain saw or a power saw to have an impromptu rally. We sawed the 'A' and smashed it with a sledgehammer. During all of this Justin shows up and he is sensing the madness and hysteria of some of our football players and seeking to take advantage of this spiritual energy, he asked to use what was left of the 'A' for his presentation.

When Justin smashed the A the noise level was deafening. In that gym on that day was the first time I ever saw Damien as united and as one in mind, heart and purpose. It was a pep rally but it was also a bigger, deeper ultimate meaning rally that the Holy Spirit brought about. Very few people knew it but it wasn't just about beating Amat that fired us up it was about beating leprosy on Molokai. Justin brought about a brilliant marriage of enthusiasm and spiritual openness. He redirected our hearts and minds toward each other and let the students see each other in a new light as brothers. He did this by being open and sharing, similar to kairos and by letting our students come up and write down their personal struggles. Later he read some of them out loud. I received a powerpoint from Hard As Nails with all of the quotes taken from what our Damien guys wrote down.

At first I was skeptical because of the nature and intensity of what our guys wrote. But when I shared it with my senior Christian Leadership class they began to recognize their own quotes and verified that they were real, authentic Damien issues. After my many Kairos experiences I shouldn't have been surprised but I was. In response to the question, 'What are your greatest struggles? Here are some of what our students at Damien wrote...

- "My brother passed away in Iraq and my parents divorced. No one knows I'm suicidal"
- "I lost my uncle and grandpa within two years"
- "My mom had an abortion. My parents gave up on me"
- "My brother died when I was four"
- "I've thought about suicide and my father makes me feel worthless"
- "I have been saved from a suicide attempt but my best friend died in my arms"
- "My friend hung himself"
- "Depression, suicidal thoughts, lack of Faith"
- "My girlfriend was raped. I've considered suicide"
- "My parents got divorced because my dad was on drugs"
- "My dad made a new family and forgot about me and my sister"
- "I constantly fight with my mom"
- "I don't talk to my parents, my life is sad"
- "My sister disowned my family"
- "My parents are divorced and I have FAKE relationship with my dad"
- "My mom was beaten by her boyfriend, and I was sent to juvie for defending her"
- "I never met my father"
- "I heard my dad say 'he didn't love me' and I haven't seen him for four years"
- "Family anger. Fighting with parents. Anger. Father left when I was young then came back when I was 13. I have a weight issue"
- "I suffer from depression"
- "My mom is struggling with cancer"
- "I have a disabled sister"
- "I struggle everyday with OCD"
- "My sister can't feel her lower extremities and my dad just had heart surgery"
- "Cystic Fibrosis"

- “I have a poor self-image”
- “I’m starting to get scared to stand up for what I believe in”
- “I want to be known as a better athlete”
- “I’m scared I will let everyone down and won’t be good enough for anyone”
- “Overcoming obesity”
- “I struggle with cutting and drug addiction”
- “My dad’s an alcoholic”
- “I was addicted to pornography”
- “I have a masturbating problem”
- “My parents are constantly fighting. I think about all the names I’ve been called and I feel alone”
- “Teased at school everyday”
- “Being made fun of because of my weight”
- “I was abused when I was little”

Leprosy was the most mentioned disease in the Bible. In the ancient world lepers were cast out and declared unclean. They were abandoned. Some of our families, especially our students’ fathers have abandoned their responsibility. We’re living in extreme times. In some ways the whole world is Molokai. Molokai is all around us. Since the fall of Adam and Eve we are living like Saint Damien on Molokai over 100 years ago. Many individuals are separated from their own family and left alone. Families all around us have been ripped apart and as a result our dignity as people has suffered. This is why we are all called to be campus ministers and ambassadors of Christ.

Christ came to restore that dignity and to raise the families in unity and strength. He sent Saint Damien to be his ambassador of peace, love and joy to a de-moralized band of desperate individuals.

The difference then and now, there and here, is visual. The students around us look normal. They are at a school which costs money to attend so some display an outward sign of material comfort. Others try their best to fit in. They all look the same and no one knows whose leprosy is worse at first. Sooner or later signs will appear and we if we pay attention, we can detect the ones who are hurting and hiding that hurt. This is what I came to see in my service as campus minister. Prior to that I was a blind leper and happy to pretend that Molokai was some far- away place in the past. I assigned St. Damien to the annals of history. He was someone we would dust off every September to hurry up and get through freshmen year. Our students are required to know the story of Damien and the story of Molokai but no one tells them they are about to live that story.

The third thing that helped me to recognize Molokai was when St. Damien's relic came to our campus. St. Damien came and it was amazing to see how his foot-bone, that most holy and powerful thing, transformed our chapel into a piece of heaven itself. If you were there at lunch when we prayed with St. Damien before the Blessed Sacrament you'll recall it was quite a moment. The chapel was full. Everyone was on their knees and the intensity of that moment was exhilarating. We entered into part of his story when we recalled that he said, "If it wasn't for the presence of our Divine Savior in the chapel, I could never have endured my lot with the lepers." Those lepers he said "Observe adoration every night". You can't do better as a servant of God than to bring the sick, suffering sinner into the presence of Christ Himself. It was extreme prayer for an extreme situation. St. Damien brought us lepers to Christ that day. It was amazing and we remembered that the real Molokai had joy too!

In the midst of this happiness which St. Damien brought Molokai was the stark reality of death, lots of death! St. Damien was an expert grave digger. We too had to bury our dead. This was the fourth eye opener for me this year.

The value of life is never more appreciated then when it stands in stark contrast to death. It seemed uncanny the loss of such important people that the school had to endure this year alone. Jim Dineen, Ken Kowalewski, Rose Yaros, Paula Smith, Travis Eschardies... May perpetual light shine upon them. In the midst of death St. Damien pointed out the beauty of life. Life must be lived with dignity and gratitude not squandered or taken for granted.

Above all, in Molokai, we must never say our life is done or that there is no point in persevering. Who will ever forget how Cameron Mitchell gave us the same message of St. Damien. "I want to live, I want to fix this...I want to... run, hammer, climb, swing, curl, I want to be there when my class graduates!" Who didn't here St. Damien tell him, "No Cameron you do deserve this, you are worth it!" from his little sister's lips. What a profound witness for the value of life.

This is when, like so many lepers did so long ago, I succumbed to the pressure as tears flooded out. I remember finding an isolated place behind the bleachers as I slumped over and cried hard. I didn't think it at the time but I do now, 'This is Molokai'. Christ was there in that gym in the agonizing silence. Christ stayed with us. In the chapel that day we had adoration. For the first time ever we left the Host exposed throughout the end of the day. Whole classes came to pray and to seek solace. My last class meditated before the Blessed Sacrament on Cameron's words about the things we all take for granted but never appreciate. That night our basketball team won a playoff game dedicated to Cameron. Later, Cameron was there when we won our first ever CIF championship. He shared in the victory and glory of Molokai.

We had our opportunities this year to be in touch with Jesus. The lepers in His life on earth were in need of His love and forgiveness. When we went to confession during Advent or during Lent or any other time this year we were like lepers again...lepers who knew, through humility that we were in need of help. "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. How many confessions did St. Damien hear? How many souls did he lead home to Christ?

Another story about lepers had to do with the leper's response to His healing and forgiveness. Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. "As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." That leper knew a secret....gratitude is the key to happiness. Be grateful for the presence of Christ in your life. I am a grateful leper because I can honestly say as Damien did, If it wasn't for the presence of our divine Lord in our chapel, I could never have endured my lot with the lepers as Campus Minister. I am able to express that gratitude in the Eucharist, the sacrament of thanksgiving every day on campus. Next year I will continue as a 'small c' campus minister with a happy heart knowing that I have also encountered Christ through other lepers, my students and my fellow workers in the vineyard.

St. Damien was not the first to come but he was the first to stay. Because of that the lepers discovered that Jesus is present, not in spite of, but because this is Molokai.