

28th Sunday per Annum - C
II Kings 5:14-17;
II Timothy 2:8-13;
Luke 17:11-19
Little Flower - 10/9/16

My Brothers and Sisters,

Jesus' healing or cleansing of the ten lepers is a story of God's mercy, faith, and gratitude.

The ancient Jews believed leprosy to be a punishment from God and to be highly contagious. Therefore, those who contracted leprosy were expelled from family and community. They were forced to live as outcasts. Some scholars argue that a leper, for example, was not permitted to come within six feet of another person, even a member of his own family. This is why the Gospel tells us that the ten lepers "*stood at a distance from him and raised their voices saying, 'Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!'*"

More importantly, because family and community were the essence of Jewish life, lepers became the living dead, i.e., physically alive but dead to their families and community. Therefore, when Jesus cured the ten lepers, he not only cured them of a physical disease. In effect, he gave them back their lives by re-incorporating them into their families and their community.

Ultimately this miracle is a story of God's superabundant mercy. In this story, Jesus not only delivered the ten lepers from the disease of leprosy, which also implied the forgiveness of sin, but also gave them back their families and their community. They were once again fully alive.

In his First Letter, St. John wrote: "*We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers. Whoever does not love remains in death*" [I Jn. 3:14]. The second part of this verse has also been translated as "*The man who does not love is among the living dead*" [NAB, 1970]. In other words, love is life. If we want to live, we have to love. Without love, we, like the ten lepers, are among the living dead.

This miracle and the curing of Naaman the Syrian are also stories of faith. The ten lepers expressed their faith in word and action. First they asked Jesus to have pity on them; then even before they were cured, they obeyed Jesus' command to go show themselves to the priests. The Gospel makes the point that they were healed as they were on their way to show themselves to the priests.

To understand the healing of Naaman as a story of faith, we have to know some of the back story. When Naaman arrived at the house of Elisha, the prophet simply sent word to him to wash seven times in the Jordan. This angered him, and he left. However, his servants reasoned with him that if the prophet had asked him to do something extraordinary, he would have done it in a heartbeat, so why should he not obey this simple command. This reminds us that all too often we too want extraordinary signs from God before we believe.

Finally, both stories are also stories of gratitude or the lack thereof. Only one leper returned to thank Jesus, and he was a Samaritan. We know that the Jews looked down on the Samaritans as heathens of sorts. Jesus uses this story to teach us that outsiders, those at the peripheries, those about whom Pope Francis speaks so often, are often more grateful than insiders who often feel entitled. Likewise, Naaman the Syrian, obviously a non-Jew, returned to thank Elisha.

My brothers and sisters, last Sunday was Respect Life Sunday. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the former Archbishop of Chicago, frequently used the image of a seamless garment to describe a consistent ethic of life. As Christians, we have to work to promote respect for all human life from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. We are now approximately four weeks away from Election Day. As we prepare to vote, I would suggest that we look at all political issues through a pro-life lens and then ask ourselves which candidates will do the most to respect and protect all human life.