

# Luke 17:11-19

October 9th, 2016, Year C, 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

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We have some very powerful connections between our First Reading and our Gospel today. The First Reading is the story of Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, and it is taken from Second Kings Chapter 5. We only get a small part of the story in today's reading, so I encourage you to go back and read the whole thing. In it we are told that Naaman was a great man, a mighty man of valor, but he had a problem, he was a leper. The disease of Leprosy is central to both readings, so it is important to understand a little bit about it.

According to Web MD, leprosy is an infectious disease that causes severe, disfiguring skin sores along with nerve damage in the arms and legs. The disease has been around since ancient times. The oldest civilizations of China, Egypt, and India feared leprosy as an incurable, mutilating, and contagious disease. Leprosy is known today as Hansen's disease, and only in recent decades has modern medicine been able to effectively treat it.

The second common theme between the two stories is that both Naaman and the ten lepers in the Gospel knew they had a problem they couldn't solve on their own. Naaman knew something drastic was needed for him to become well. He humbled himself, taking the advice of a lowly Israelite slave girl, to go into enemy territory, and to seek healing from a foreign prophet. Naaman had to learn humility. Where Naaman was a powerful, influential, and well-connected man. The ten lepers were at the other end of society's spectrum. They were standing at a distance and shouting out to Jesus because they had been cast out of the community. The Jews had an elaborate set of laws in place to deal with a potentially contagious disease, like Leprosy. If a person developed any kind of a skin condition they were to go and show themselves to a priest. The priest would examine them, quarantine them for a time, and if the disease seemed to

be spreading, they would declare them unclean. Those determined to be unclean were expelled from the community out of fear of an outbreak. Declared lepers had to wear loose fitting clothes, keep their heads bare, and their mouths covered with a cloth. They were to warn anyone in their vicinity they were unclean. The only way for a leper to get back into the community was for them to be healed. The healing had to be verified by a priest. The ten lepers were way beyond worrying about their image in society, they knew they needed a miracle.

The third common element to these two stories is that a miraculous healing occurs. Naaman reluctantly follows the Prophet Elisha's instructions. He goes and washes himself seven times in the Jordan River and we are told, "His flesh again became like the flesh of a little child." In the Gospel Jesus simply tells the ten, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Implicit in this statement is a promise of healing. There is no other reason for these lepers to return to the priests unless they had been healed. On their way to the priests, we are told they are made clean.

The final common element between the two stories is the recognition their healing is from God, coupled with a desire to give thanks for the gift received. Naaman at first tries to pay Elisha for his healing. Elisha refuses to accept the payment. Then Naaman asks Elisha if he can take two loads of earth from Israel, so that he can make sacrifice to the true God, the God of Israel. In the Gospel, one of the ten lepers, a Samaritan, a foreigner, realizing he has been healed, returns to Jesus, crying out praise to God, and falling on his face in thanksgiving at the feet of Jesus.

What can we take from these stories today? I believe they provide us with a simple sort of blue print of our faith. One that can give us a better personal understanding of our faith, and one that will help us to better explain and share our faith with others. The first step in our blue print is that, from very early on the Church Fathers saw the physical disease of Leprosy as an

analogy for the spiritual disease of sin. What leprosy does to the body, the gradual disfigurement and decay, that leads to an agonizingly slow death, sin does to the soul. Leprosy also caused a person to be separated from the community; breaking relationships between friends and family. Sin brings about a similar type of separation. It not only damages our relationships with friends and family, but it also damages our relationship with God. The notion of sin is not particularly popular today. Many people refuse to acknowledge the sin in their lives. We consider ourselves to be basically pretty good people. The truth of the matter is that we all are dealing with issues associated with sin and its effects. Issues like addiction, lust, greed, envy, injustice, bigotry, and violence. We are all dealing with this innate tendency to choose selfishness over self-giving; the tendency to choose our will over God's will.

So where does this leave us? In a way, we are all spiritual lepers, and our situation is desperate. We cannot cure ourselves. Just as Naaman had to learn humility, so do we. He needed to ask for God's mercy in faith, so do we. The ten lepers didn't have any issues with humility. They knew they needed God's mercy, and they believed in Jesus' power to heal them. We need to make that same connection. We need to approach Jesus in humility and faith, asking Him to make us well.

The next step is up to the Lord. Through His mercy, Jesus will bring about the healing of our soul. Fr. Michael Gaitley tells us that Jesus' mercy, Divine Mercy, is a particular kind of love, a particular mode of love that responds to suffering, poverty, brokenness, and sin. We should have faith that Jesus will do His part, that He will heal our souls, because that is the reason he became man, the reason he went to the Cross. Jesus wants to pour out His healing mercy on all of us. In His mercy, we are healed of our brokenness and we find new life in Christ. This is the incredibly "Good News" of the Gospel.

After His Resurrection, Jesus breathed on the Apostles and gave them His power to bind and loose, to forgive sins or to hold them bound. This power has been handed down through Apostolic succession to our priests today. The reason we confess our sins to a priest is because that is the way Jesus wanted it to work. That is the sacrament He gave to us. He wanted us to physically hear those words of absolution, so there would be no doubt, so that we would know we are forgiven. It is no accident that the image of Divine Mercy hangs in the confessional. Jesus' mercy is there waiting for us. We just have to have the humility and faith to walk through that door.

The final step in our blue print is how do we respond to this gift of new life? We have been forgiven. Our leprosy has been cleansed. We need to follow the example of Naaman and the Samaritan leper. We need to turn around and give thanks to God. When someone does something nice for us, most of us will say thank you. That is just good manners. When someone heals you of an incurable disease and opens up the pathway to eternal life, the appropriate response is to say thank you! Does God need our thanks? No, God is complete in Himself; He doesn't need anything from us. Does God want our thanks? Yes, and I say that with conviction, because what relationship in our lives does not benefit from a heartfelt thank you? If you never say thank you to your spouse or friends, when they do something nice for you, you are not a good spouse or a good friend. Why would our relationship with God be any different?

There are a number of ways we can express our thanks to God. One way to give thanks is for us to pray. Our prayer can be as simple as saying, "Thank you God for all the blessings you have given me." Another way of giving thanks to God is to pass on the gift by sharing your faith with others. When we truly recognize the totally undeserved gift our salvation, we should want to share it. That is the mission Jesus gives to us. Another, excellent way to express our

thankfulness is to come together in communion with other believers to celebrate the Mass.

When we celebrate the Mass we are doing exactly what the Samaritan leper did, we are praising God, and thanking Jesus for our salvation.

As we move through this Mass today, I invite you to pay particular attention to the words of the Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer. This is the part of the Mass when Fr. Glenn will say, “Lift up your hearts.” We will reply, “We lift them up to the Lord.” Father continues, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.” We reply, “It is right and just.” Father goes on, “It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God, through Christ our Lord.” Thanking God for all He has done for you is a great reason to come to Mass. Our time at Mass is our opportunity to offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving to God for all the gifts He has given us, and we should do that like the Samaritan leper did, in a loud voice and with all of our heart.

Our four step blue print for understanding and sharing our faith is then, first, the “bad news”, “We are sinners in need of healing!” Second, we need to recognize the desperation of our situation and ask, in faith, for Gods mercy. Third, we are healed by the really “Good News” of God’s loving mercy. The fourth step is we need to give thanks to God for our salvation. It is only right and just. Finally, I want to remind everyone that we are still in the Jubilee Year of Mercy that Pope Francis has declared. It is a special time of grace for the Church and her people. It is a particularly good time to experience God’s mercy in your life. So, if you have never had that experience of God’s mercy, or maybe if it has been kind of a while since you last did, I strongly encourage you to take the advice Jesus gave to the ten lepers, “Go and show yourselves to a priest.”