

The Twenty Eighth Week in Ordinary Time
October 9, 2016

Our first reading from the second book of Kings and the Gospel of Luke share the common themes of faith, gratitude and mercy. And these two readings are also linked by the responses of those who have been cured.

In the story of Naaman and Elisha, Naaman is cured of his leprosy by following Elisha's instructions to bathe in the Jordan River. Although at first he isn't sure that the simple act of taking a bath will work, Naaman is so thrilled about his cure that he wants to offer Elisha a gift. In those days, it was common practice to offer presents to prophets who were seen as servants of God.

But Elisha breaks tradition by refusing the gift. He doesn't refuse the gift because there was anything unusual or inappropriate about the gift offering, but Elisha wants to emphasize to Naaman that the work was done by God, and not by his own power.

Notice that there's one very interesting difference between the healing of the leper Naaman and the healing of the ten lepers in our Gospel reading. Naaman asks Elisha specifically for healing. When the band of lepers saw Jesus they made an even bolder request. Instead of asking Jesus for healing, they ask for *mercy*.

The word *mercy* literally means "*sorrowful at heart*". But mercy is more than just compassion, or heartfelt sorrow at another's misfortune. While compassion empathizes with the sufferer, mercy goes much deeper. It removes suffering. A merciful person shares in another's misfortune and suffering as if it were his or her own. And he or she will do everything in their power to dispel that misery.

Mercy is also connected with justice. Thomas Aquinas said that mercy "*does not destroy justice, but is a certain kind of fulfillment of justice. ..Mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution; (and) justice without mercy is cruelty.*"

So what's the significance of the ten lepers asking for mercy? They seem to know that they're in need of both spiritual *and* physical healing.

They approach Jesus with remorse and faith because they believe that he can release the burden of guilt and suffering and make restoration of body *and* soul possible. Their request for mercy is both a plea for pardon and release from suffering. Jesus gives mercy to all who ask with faith and repentance.

But healing doesn't automatically translate into salvation, as we see in the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan who returns. In returning to give thanks to Jesus, the Samaritan demonstrates that he has come to believe, and that in believing, he receives the gift of God offered to him in Jesus.

He isn't praised solely for his gratitude but for accepting the challenge to believe. Jesus underscores the significance of the Samaritan's action by declaring, "Your faith has saved you."

Of the ten lepers who were cured, only the Samaritan seems to understand the real significance of what happened. It's not the cure that brings him back to Jesus but the realization that *in Jesus* is God's salvation. In a certain sense, Luke's story isn't a miracle story but a conversion story. Seen in this light, the Samaritan's gratitude takes on a deeper level of meaning.

Were not the others grateful? We do not know. But they did not return to say so.

See, gratitude is not just a social grace. Gratitude is a habit of the heart. None of us is our own source of existence or the source of all that we need to survive and flourish. All of life is a gift to us.

Truly grateful people acknowledge that they are recipients of countless gifts from others, from nature and from God. True gratitude springs from that essential insight.

The very word "gratitude" comes from the same root as the word "grace" – gift (Latin: *gratia*). Think: "grateful"; "graceful."

In Greek, grateful is *eucharistain* – the word we Christians use for our celebration of the Eucharist, which is the ultimate act of gratitude, thanksgiving for life and salvation in Jesus.

That's why we are here today. To acknowledge and celebrate that we are grateful for everything from God, through Jesus Christ.

Just like Naaman and the Samaritan, gratitude enriches us: It opens us to experience the bounty of God's healing and salvation. And the added bonus to all of this is that the more grateful we are, the more we will find to be grateful.