

This Sunday's Readings – the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Once again, the theme of this Sunday's readings is faith.

The first reading is from the 2nd Book of Kings. The two Books of Kings, as the name implies, is a history of the Jewish monarchy from King Solomon (approximately 961 BCE) to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Even though it appears to be simply a chronological account of the history of Israel, it is really a theological history. The books were written sometime during the Babylonian captivity and were edited any number of times. In this particular reading, the story of Elisha's curing of the leper Naaman is recounted. Elisha was a prophet of the Northern Kingdom of Israel sometime during the mid 800's BCE. He also directly succeeded Elijah, after Elijah was taken up into heaven in a fiery chariot. To fully understand this reading, please read chapter 5 of the 2nd Book of Kings. Naaman was a successful military commander in the service of the king of Aram, modern day Syria. Naaman was a pagan and a foreigner who also was a leper. What was a leper? A leper was a person with any type of skin disease, not just Hansen's disease which is true leprosy. In Israel, they were social outcasts who could not participate in the social and religious life of the community. Naaman went to Elisha to be cured. Elisha told him to bathe in the Jordan River 7 times. At first Naaman resisted but then did as Elisha directed and was cured. Through faith, Naaman comes to the realization that the God of Israel is the one true God. Note how Elisha refuses to accept Naaman's gift, lest it be thought that the cure came from Elisha and not Yahweh. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column further explains – "On the other hand, another theological aspect in this II Kings passage hasn't (or shouldn't have) changed. Elisha refuses Naaman's grateful and gracious post-cure gift. "As Yahweh lives whom I serve," the prophet asserts, "I will not take it." Elisha's adamant refusal springs from the biblical conviction that accepting a "stipend" for performing a holy action is tantamount to saying the human agent, not God, accomplished the sacred act. One way to know God actually performed the action was for the person through whom God worked to refuse any payment for his or her part in the event. Though this no-pay-for-sacred actions belief has never changed, we Christians have created all sorts of theological loopholes permitting us to "end run" around it. (e.g. "I can't accept anything for doing it, but you could give me something on the occasion of my doing it.") Elisha warns us that any linkage between money and the sacred is always forbidden. (Read on a few more verses to find out what later happens to Gehazi, Elisha's servant, after he finagles two talents of silver and two festal garments from Naaman.)"

In the Gospel reading from Luke, the story of the "Cleansing of the Ten Lepers" is recounted. This story is recounted only in the Gospel of Luke. As Jesus continued His final journey to Jerusalem, He encountered 10 lepers who begged Him to cure them. He simply told them to "go show yourselves to the priests". Only the priests could declare them clean so that they could once again join society. On the way to see the priests, they were cured. Only one of them, a Samaritan, when he saw that he was cured returned to thank and glorify Jesus even before he went to the priests. Remember the first reading where Naaman, a pagan and a foreigner, gave glory to God after he was cured. Such was that man's faith. What happened to the other 9? We will never know. However, this is

another example of the message of universality in Luke's gospel. The Good News is for everyone, not just the Israelites. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on today's Gospel reading – "But there is another theme in the gospel that could be developed, and that is the theme of gratitude. It is striking that all ten lepers were healed. The grateful one got no more than the others did, except the assurance from the Lord, "Your faith has made you well." Nor did the other lepers lose what they had. There was no punitive miracle returning them to their leprous state. There is much to meditate upon here. The gifts of God are without repentance; gratitude has no ulterior motivation, for example to secure further blessings. Ingratitude is perhaps the most common of all human failings, as Shakespeare observed: "Blow, blow thou winter cold; thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude.""

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* gives us a better understanding of the cultural implications of today's readings – "Biblical scholars and medical scientists agree that true leprosy, or Hansen's disease, almost certainly did not exist in first century Palestine. The disease was brought to the Middle East from India by the armies of Alexander the Great about 300 B.C., but no trace of true leprosy has been found in any of the ancient bones excavated in Israel. Only one case was discovered in Egypt, and the bones were dated to the first century of the common era! True leprosy is only mildly contagious. Even spouses do not usually "catch" it from their infected partners. Yet the scaly condition described in Leviticus 14 and 15 is feared not because it is contagious but rather because it is polluting. "Biblical leprosy" is not "catchy;" it's "dirty;" and it makes individuals and the community "dirty;" "impure;" "unclean." Finally, neither the Hebrew nor Greek Bible uses the correct word for "true" leprosy. Instead, the words they used describe a repulsive, flaky, or scaly condition affecting the skin, clothes, and walls of the home. History and anthropology rather than medicine and science help us understand why our ancestors in the Faith were so concerned about this "leprosy!"

LEPROSY AND BOUNDARIES

The "purity" laws in Leviticus 11-15 deal with boundaries. Leviticus 11 pertains to the mouth, an opening in the body through which "approved" and "unapproved" foods cross the body boundary and enter the interior. Leviticus 12 concerns conception and childbirth, processes that cross the body boundary through the female body opening. Leviticus 13 and 14 describe a repulsive, flaky or scaly condition affecting the skin, clothes, and walls—three kinds of boundaries. In each case the biblical text reflects the concern about whether or not the problem is deeper than the skin or, in other words, whether it has "pierced" the boundary. Finally, Leviticus 15 discusses male and female involuntary discharges or leaks escaping the body's boundaries through body openings difficult (impossible?) to control. Anthropologists point out that a society concerned with maintaining safe and secure body boundaries is also concerned with safe and secure societal or geographical boundaries. Rules governing the physical body replicate rules governing the social or geographical body. In this same historical period the purity laws of Leviticus 11-15 began to be rigidly enforced. Marriage laws protected the boundaries of society; purity laws protected the human body boundaries. One set of laws (purity) reflects and reinforces the other set of laws (marriage). And the reason for all these laws

is to ensure that Israel would remain “holy as the Lord is holy,” a recurring theme in Leviticus.

HEALING CHALLENGES BOUNDARIES

Luke reports that ten people afflicted with a repulsive, scaly skin condition (weakened body boundaries) approach Jesus and ask for *mercy* (v. 13). In the Mediterranean world, mercy describes that human quality that motivates a person to meet his or her interpersonal obligations. In effect, the ten people in Luke are asking Jesus to give them what he owes them! And what would that be? In another instance, a leper asked Jesus “to be *made clean*” (Matt 8:1-2; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-16). Their condition posed a polluting threat to their community. They were excluded from the community and, most importantly, from common worship. They had to remain outside the boundaries. What such people are “owed” is membership in the holy community, restoration to that membership if it has been suspended. The ten who ask for mercy acknowledge that Jesus can restore them to the holy community. Jesus as healer was constantly challenging existing boundaries and pushing them ever outward. Sinners, the blind, the lame, and lepers were welcome within the boundaries of the holy community Jesus was forming. Healing, technically, means restoring meaning to life; curing technically refers to resolving biomedical problems. The cultural world of Jesus knew it was God alone who heals. Jesus was a gifted intermediary or broker. Nine of those healed went to Jerusalem to give “praise to God” in the presence of the priests; one came to “praise God” in Jesus' presence. Even though Jesus had not mentioned offering the sacrifice out of consideration for this Samaritan, the Samaritan knew full well he wouldn't be welcome or perhaps even permitted to enter the Jerusalem Temple. Hence he gave praise to the One who healed him and to that One's broker, Jesus. Moreover, it was only the Samaritan who said “thank you” to Jesus. In the ancient Middle East, to say “thank you” is to end a relationship. A popular modern saying affirms, “Don't thank me; you will repay me [with a favor when I am in need].” The Samaritan recognized it would be impossible to repay his Galilean benefactor or approach him again if the problem returned, as it often did. The Judean lepers were a different story. As members of the same in-group, they could approach Jesus anywhere at any time. The Samaritan knew he was in the “wrong” place at the “right” time, and such an opportunity might never occur again for him. The Samaritan's repulsive skin condition is ameliorated; Jesus welcomes him into the community. Other Judeans and Galileans would not be so accepting. Will we, the modern followers of Jesus, imitate our Master or his compatriots?”

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