

The Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Kings 5:14-17
<i>Response</i>	[The Lord] has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Timothy 2:8-13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[G]ive thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 17:11-19

The 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time takes us away from some of the parables of Jesus and gives us a brief interlude with one of the stories of Jesus' miraculous healings. Sometimes this is called the story of the ten lepers. I'm going to call it the story of the grateful leper, because I think that's really where the focus is on, on the one leper who's healed and who shows gratitude. So this is Luke 17:11-19. Again, the Gospel is short, but it's rich:

On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samar'ia and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then said Jesus, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

End of the Gospel. Okay, remember in the book of Luke how we've seen Jesus journeying down from Galilee all the way to Jerusalem, and that the middle portion of Luke's Gospel is focused on this journey towards Jerusalem—Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem. Well this story gives us a kind of geographical cue when it says:

On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samar'ia and Galilee.

So if you think of the map of Jerusalem, you'll remember, Galilee is in the north; it's the northern territory. Judah is the southern territory where the Israelites live. But in between, there were remnants of the northern kingdom called Samaria. And this is where the descendants of the Assyrians would set up their own temple on Mount Gerizim and kind of blended the Assyrian people with the religion of Israel, called the Samaritans—this is where they dwelt. Their origins went back to the time of the Assyrian Exile in 722 BC or so. And they were not liked by the Jews, to say the least, and it was mutual—the feeling was mutual.

In any case, Jesus is passing between Samaria and these lower regions of Galilee, and he enters a village and is met by these lepers. Now in order to understand what happens here you need to notice a detail. It says that the ten lepers “stood at a distance and lifted up their voices and said, ‘Jesus, have mercy on us.’” Now this description of them standing at a distance presupposes one of the laws of the Old Testament regarding leprosy. So if you remember, in the Old Testament, leprosy was a skin disease that was both terminal and communicable. In a sense, it was considered deadly and contagious. So a number of chapters in the book of Leviticus are actually dedicated entirely to laws of leprosy. What do you do if you get leprosy? What does a person who has leprosy have to do with relationship to both the Temple and to the wider community? And in Leviticus chapter 13:45-46, we read these words. It says:

“The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.

Alright, so pause there. So originally the laws of Leviticus are given for the camp of Israelites, since they're traveling through the desert in the exodus from Egypt. But eventually, they'd be applied to local towns and local villages once the people settled in the land. So what this passage is imagining is that if someone gets leprosy they would have to live outside of the town—or outside of a village—and that if someone came close to them, they would, as it says, put their hand over their upper lip, in other words, to shout out crying, "Unclean, unclean." The presupposition here is that they keep their distance. They can only stay within shouting distance of other people so that they don't contract the disease—or so that they don't pass the disease to those who are well.

So in this case, Jesus is passing through a village and it says these ten lepers are standing at a distance, and they lift up their voices, but instead of crying out, "Unclean, unclean," as in the Old Testament, instead they say, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." So see the similarity and the difference there. They cry out to Jesus for mercy and they call him Master, or Lord. And so when he responds to them, Jesus says something interesting. He says, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." Now that's a bit of an odd response, or you might think it's an odd response. Why doesn't Jesus just say, "Be healed"? Or why doesn't he say, "Come to me," and touch them and heal them. Jesus heals people in different ways throughout the Gospels, and in this case, He's following the law of Moses, because if you go back to the Old Testament, actually two chapters, Leviticus 13-14, are entirely dedicated to the laws of leprosy and what the priest had to do in the Old Testament.

One of the primary obligations or duties of priests in the Old Testament wasn't just to offer sacrifice in the Temple, it was also to act as a kind of doctor, in the sense that they would inspect people's sores and evidence that they might have leprosy and make judgments about whether the person was clean or unclean, on the basis of the kind of sores they had, what color the hair was coming out of the sores. It gets pretty detailed and a little gross to be quite frank. So if you're interested in that kind of thing, check out Leviticus 13. It's not most people's favorite chapter in the Old Testament, but it is fascinating, because it's one of the aspects of Old Testament priesthood that was very obviously an important part of their ministry.

So in this case, Jesus sends the lepers to the priest to perform the rite of priestly inspection of a leper who has been cleansed. Now I'm not going to read the whole passage. Well, you know what? I am going to read the whole passage. Let's read it. It's interesting stuff. This isn't in the lectionary for a whole number of reasons, but it's fascinating and it's the essential background. Luke assumes you know this passage in order to understand the interchange between Jesus and the lepers.

In Leviticus 14:1-9, this is what Jesus is sending the lepers to go and do when he says, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." This is what the first century Jewish audience would expect would happen, and I want you to contrast it with what actually happens in the Gospel. So in the Old Testament, if a person had leprosy and they wanted to be inspected by the priest to see if they had been cleansed, this is what happens:

The Lord said to Moses, "This shall be the law of the leper for the day of his cleansing. He shall be brought to the priest; and the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall make an examination. Then, if the leprous disease is healed in the leper, the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two living clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet stuff and hyssop; and the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over running water. He shall take the living bird with the cedarwood and the scarlet stuff and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water; and he shall sprinkle it seven times upon him who is to be cleansed of leprosy; then he shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird go into the open field. And he who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water, and he shall be clean; and after that he shall come into the camp, but shall dwell outside his tent seven days. And on the seventh day he shall shave all his hair off his head; he shall shave off his beard and his eyebrows, all his hair. Then he shall wash his clothes, and bathe his body in water, and he shall be clean.

Alright, so notice what's going on here. You have an act of cleansing. He's being brought to the priest. Second, the priest is going to make an examination of his body to make sure the leprosy is in fact gone. If it is, there's going to be a sacrifice.

One bird will be killed and another will be let go—kind of like the scapegoats, where you have one goat killed and one goat let go, which is an atoning sacrifice. Blood and water is going to be sprinkled seven times. Seven is the number of the covenant, so this is a covenantal sacrificial sacrifice, representing his being brought back into the covenant community. The priest is going to pronounce him clean and then he's going to wash himself in water, shave off all his hair, because the hair was often seen as being tied to the leper's sores, and then he will be reinstated in the community. He shall be declared clean.

So when Jesus says...that's probably TMI, right? That's probably more than you ever wanted to know about leprosy. It's important because as background to the Gospel, when Jesus says to the lepers, "Go show yourselves to the priests," He's presupposing Leviticus 14. That's what they're expecting they're going to have to do. They're going to go to the priest, the priest will make an inspection, they'll have to offer sacrifice. There'll be an examination, they're going to shave their hair off, they're going to get washed and cleaned. They'll wait seven days and then they're going to finally be reinstated into the community.

But what actually happens? On their way, as soon as they obey Jesus' command to act as if they are clean of their leprosy by going show themselves to the priest for an inspection...as they're on their way, they're cleansed of leprosy. It disappears. It's gone, right? And so what happens is one of the ten lepers, who happens to be a Samaritan, realizes that the person he needs to thank for being cleansed is Jesus of Nazareth. So he turns back and he goes to Jesus. Notice what he does. He praises God—literally glorifies God—and gives thanks to Jesus by falling at his feet.

Now what's interesting about that is the twofold thanksgiving. He recognizes both that God has healed him, but he also recognizes that Jesus has healed him. And he does something kind of striking, he falls on his face. In other words, he gets prostrate before Jesus. That's a strange thing to do either for a Jew or a Samaritan. Because by the first century AD, Samaritans—like the Jews—are monotheists. They only believe in one God. They actually have accepted the five books of Moses as Scripture and they worship the One God in their temple at Mount Gerizim. And so Samaritans, just like Jews, they're not like pagans. They don't fall prostrate before other human beings and take on a posture of worship to another

human being. And yet, the Samaritan here, while glorifying God, falls on his face, and the Greek word here is *eucharisteō*. He eucharists, he gives thanks to Jesus for the healing.

So there's kind of an ambiguity here. Is he thanking Jesus or is he thanking God? And the answer is he's doing both in this very shocking and very striking scene. Now when Jesus sees this, notice Jesus doesn't say, "Stand up. I'm just a man," which is what Paul will do in the book of Acts when the pagans try to worship him. It's what the angel does in the book of Revelation when John falls on his face before the angel. Jesus accepts the honor being given to him by the Samaritan, and instead, He says, "How many were cleansed? Weren't there ten? Where are the other nine?"

"Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

Ouch. Tough words, right? The Greek word there, *allogenēs*, it only occurs here in the New Testament. And it literally means, "someone of another race." So *allos* means "other," *genēs* means "race," so *allogenēs* is this person of another race—in other words, referring to the Samaritan as being of a different race because they were descended from the Gentiles; they were descended from the Assyrians. So after Jesus says this, He says, "Rise, go your way." What has made you well? Your *epistis*, your trust, your faith. So another key theme we've seen in this chapter is the healing power, the saving power of faith. The Samaritan believed Jesus when Jesus said, "Go show yourselves to the priest," and he was immediately cleansed. He was immediately healed.

What I was about to say was that in the Gospel of Luke, one of the key themes we've found is not just the importance of faith, but also the importance of the conversion of the nations, the fact that the Gospel is going to begin with Israel, but then it's going to spread out beyond the confines of the people of Israel to the nations. And in this case, the Samaritan is an interesting kind of person, because he's in between Israelite and Gentile. He's not fully Israelite, because he's descended from the Assyrians, the pagan peoples. But he's not fully Gentile, because he worships the One God, and he accepts the Scriptures of Israel. He even participates in this temple at Mount Gerizim. So he's in a kind of liminal realm, an

in between realm. So it's fitting that the Gospel begins with the Jews, and it's going to go to the Samaritans, and then to the Gentiles and to the ends of the earth here.

So we see a little bit of a foretaste of the conversion of the Gentiles, or the conversion of foreigners in the faith of this Samaritan leper who had been healed and who had gratitude. And I was just going to bring this up. As I was preparing for my lecture for this video, I was using one of my favorite commentaries of Luke. It's by Father Pablo Gadenz; it's *The Gospel of Luke* in the Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture. And Fr. Gadenz mentions something very interesting that I wanted to bring to your attention. He points out that the word for "foreigner" occurs only here in the New Testament, but it also occurs on this ancient inscription that was in the Temple, that was actually unearthed archaeologically. It's called the *Soreg*. It was basically a stone inscription inside the temple with the court of the Israelites, and it warned foreigners who were coming into the temple to worship, that if they crossed the wall and entered into the temple of the Israelites, they did so in peril of death. In other words, their lives would be in their own hands if they did that, because the penalty for them crossing into the holy place was in fact death. And the Greek word in the inscription is *allogenēs*. And it says "Let no foreigner pass beyond this point."

So you can see that the idea of a foreigner, or the barriers between foreigners and Israelites, were literal barriers in the temple itself. And yet, Jesus here is beginning to break down some of those barriers by giving salvation and healing to this Samaritan. And the Samaritan breaks down those barriers by putting trust in this Jewish man from Nazareth, that He actually had the power to heal him of his leprosy. So we see the beginnings of the Gospel going out beyond the confines of Israel to the foreigners, to the Gentiles and to the Samaritans as well.

Alright, so with that said, what about the Old Testament passage for today? Well, this is one of my favorite stories from the Old Testament. It's from 2 Kings 5. It's the famous story of the healing of Naaman the Syrian, who also happened to be a leper. Now this is one of those times where if I was in charge of the lectionary, I would have included a lot more of the actual story. The lectionary only gives us verses 14-17. In other words, it gives us the ending of the story, but it doesn't give us the context. And so it's a little unfortunate, because we miss out on a lot. So let

me just give you the background. I'm going to give you one key verse that I think is actually really crucial for understanding Luke's Gospel in context.

So the story is this: Naaman is a commander of the Syrian army. So, he's a Gentile. He's not from the nation of Israel; he's from the nation of Syria, who are enemies of the Israelites, the northern kingdom. But he also happens to be a leper, and he knows that there are prophets in Israel who can perform miracles. He's told this actually by an Israelite concubine of his, a slave girl, who was captured in one of the wars. So he sends a message to the king of Israel, asking him if he could be cured of his leprosy. And what's fascinating about this is how the king responds. In verse 7 it says this:

And when the king of Israel read [Naaman's] letter, he rent his clothes and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?"

So pause there. Notice what the king of Israel's words presuppose. It presupposes that only God can cure leprosy. Other kinds of miracles can be performed, but when it comes to leprosy, that's something that only God can do, because it's completely impossible. Very important. Basically, what the king of Israel is saying is, "This guy is asking me to heal him of leprosy. Who does he think I am, God?" That's the implication. Now what happens is Elisha the prophet hears about this, and he comes into the king and says, "Let the king know that there is a God in Israel who can do this. Give these instructions to Naaman. Tell him to go and wash seven times in the Jordan River, and when he's done this, he'll be cleansed."

Now, when Naaman hears about this command, he's actually kind of put off, because the Jordan River is basically like a glorified ditch, and he knows this and he says, "We have all kinds of wondrous rivers in my own land." Think here about the Mesopotamian Valley, you've got the great rivers Tigris and Euphrates, which were actually considered to be divine because they gave life to the whole land. They're considered sacred rivers. And so there are lots of rivers in the world that I could go to if I wanted to wash and be cleansed. And so one of his servants said to him, "Well, you know, look...if he had told you to do something difficult, you'd do

it. If he tells you to do something humble and simple, why not try that also?" And that's where the reading for today really picks up. So in verse 14 it says:

So [Naaman] went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him; and he said, "Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant." But he said, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will receive none." And he urged him to take it, but he refused. Then Na'aman said, "If not, I pray you, let there be given to your servant two mules' burden of earth; for henceforth your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the Lord.

Okay, so once you have the context in mind, you can actually see what this story's about. It's a story not just of the healing of a leper, it's the story of the conversion of a Gentile, because as a result of his healing, he comes to recognize that there's only one God—one true God—and that it's the God of Israel, the God who has the power to heal him of his leprosy and make his skin clean again. And this God does this at the prompting of the prophet Elisha. Press pause there.

Remember who Elisha is? This is very important for understanding what's going on. Elisha is the successor of the prophet Elijah. And if you remember, after Elijah is taken up into heaven on a chariot of fire, his successor Elisha is given a twofold portion of his spirit. This means that Elisha is actually more powerful than Elijah, his predecessor, and he performs greater miracles than Elijah. So what's going on here then, is, in the Old Testament, in the scheme of things, Elisha, who is the prophet who heals Naaman, is considered, in a sense, the greatest miracle worker in the Old Testament. If you want an example of this, later in the book of Kings 13, after Elisha dies and is buried, someone is thrown into the grave with him and just touching his bones brings that man back from the dead. That's how holy, that's how powerful Elisha was.

Now the reason all of this matters is because if you fast forward to the New Testament, you'll recall in the Gospels, Jesus identifies John the Baptist as Elijah. And yet, Jesus is like the successor to John the Baptist. Just as Elijah was the precursor of Elisha, so John the Baptist is the precursor of Jesus. So if John the Baptist is a new Elijah, then Jesus is a new Elisha. But He's not just a new Elisha, He's greater than Elisha. So whereas Elisha only healed one leper in the Old Testament, what does Jesus, the new Elisha, do? He heals ten lepers, all at once, and they don't have to go down to the Jordan River and wash seven times. He does it instantaneously. All they have to do is obey his word and start heading toward the Temple and they're all cleansed.

This story reveals two things about Jesus, this Old Testament reading, this great pairing with the New Testament today. First, Jesus is a new and greater Elisha. He's performing miracles that are ten times—literally—greater than the Old Testament miracles. But even more than that...second, He's also a Divine Savior. Because think about it, in the Old Testament, what did it say? Who can cure leprosy directly? It's God, right? "Am I God, that I can heal this man of this leprosy?"

What did Jesus do in the New Testament? Unlike Elisha, He doesn't have to send the man down to the river and wash and do all these different things. Jesus heals the man directly and immediately. And so there's a— it's just a hint—but there's a hint of the revelation of Jesus' Divinity. If you know the Old Testament, you know that only God can cure lepers, then it begs the question: Who is this Jesus who heals ten lepers at once? And the answer comes to you when the leper comes back to Him and falls prostrate before Him and gives Him thanks for what He has done. It's an implicit revelation of the Divine identity of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. And we'll start to see some of these, especially as we get closer and closer to Jerusalem...these will be more prominent.

In any case, the Responsorial Psalm for today, the refrain is: "[The Lord] has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations." And the Hebrew word there for nations is *goyim*. It literally means the Gentiles. So, the theme for today's Gospel is about the fact that the saving power of God is breaking out beyond just

the people of Israel to include the Samaritans and, indeed, to go to the ends of the earth.

With that said, in closing, I'd just like to end with a little quotation from the living tradition. And here I'm going to quote one of my favorite authors, one of the most famous writers in antiquity: Bruno of Segni...Bruno of Segni. Nah, I'm just joking. Nobody knows who Bruno of Segni is. He was a 12th century writer—Church writer—and although he's not very famous, he did write on Luke's Gospel. And he has a beautiful quotation about this particular passage that I—it touched me, so I thought I would share it with you. So the medieval writer Bruno of Segni said this:

They stood a long way off because no one in their condition dared come too close. We stand a long way off too while we continue to sin. To be restored to health and cured of the leprosy of sin, we also must cry out: “Jesus, master, take pity on us.” That cry, however, must come not from our lips but from our heart, for the cry of the heart is louder: it pierces the heavens, rising up to the very throne of God.”²

Okay, that's from Bruno of Segni on Luke's Gospel, chapter 2, section 40. Why did I bring up that quote? Well, two things. First, in terms of the spiritual application to our own lives, Bruno makes an application that you actually see elsewhere in the tradition. Namely, that although most of us don't have physical leprosy, we all have spiritual leprosy, because we're all sinners. So one of the Church Fathers' favorite analogy for sin is leprosy, because it's both contagious and deadly. Just as leprosy spreads very easily between human beings and can make us sick and weak and even kill us, so too with sin. So the visible malady, the physical malady of leprosy in the Old Testament, in a sense, is a prefiguration of the spiritual sickness of sin in the New Testament. And just as if you had a really bad case of leprosy in the Old Testament, in order to be declared clean you would have to go to a priest, so too in the New Testament. If we're dealing with deadly sin, it's fitting that we go to a priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation to be declared clean, so that we can be reintegrated into the community and reintegrated into the worship in the temple that is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the Eucharistic liturgy.

² Bruno of Segni, *On Luke's Gospel* 2.40; trans. E. Barnecut, p. 124

And so I bring this up because, for me, it's a very powerful application of the leper on two key points. First, notice he begins by saying the leper stood a long way off because no one in their condition dared to come too close. You know, in an earlier video, I made a joke about Catholics not sitting at the front of the church, because they took Jesus' parable about taking the last seat literally. And I was just joking there, but I do think there is a sense in which a lot of people who go to Mass don't sit close because they don't feel worthy to be in the presence of God. And I can imagine that for a lot of people that's true because they haven't been to confession in 10 months, 10 years, right? 30 years? I mean, there's a real problem in our day of people not frequenting the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which is designed to give healing to spiritual lepers. So I think there's a kind of innate recognition that I shouldn't get too close to the holiness of Christ if I'm in a state of sin, even though there's still lots of confusion about the reception of Holy Communion and the importance of receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation if you're in a state of mortal sin.

And I would just point this out as a reminder that if we are in a state of mortal sin, we're like a leper, spiritually speaking. We need to go to the priest to be cleansed before we go back into the temple to receive the Bread of Life that is the Holy Eucharist. That's the first point that struck me in Bruno's words, that "we stand a long way off while we continue to sin." The second point that really hit me, though, was just the idea of gratitude. Spiritually speaking, we're all lepers. And to the extent that we've all been saved by Jesus, to the extent that we've all been healed by Jesus, then we should see ourselves in the grateful leper. Every one of us is like that Samaritan, who has been sick—spiritually speaking—but been brought back to life and cleansed through the waters of Baptism.

So again, think about Naaman, what did he do? He went down in the water of the Jordan, seven times—that's the number of the covenant—and through the water of the Jordan he was cleansed. Well, where was Jesus baptized? He's baptized in the Jordan River. So Jesus sanctifies the water of the Jordan and sanctifies thereby the water of Baptism, so today when we go into the water of Baptism, we are cleansed of the leprosy of sin. When we come up out of the water of Baptism, our flesh—our souls—are like that of a little child, made clean and made new. So our posture

of our hearts, if we're baptized Christians, should be exactly that of the Samaritan. We should all see ourselves in the grateful Samaritan who was cleansed and came back to glorify God and give thanks to Jesus.