
WORD MADE FLESH

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
2 Kings 5:14-17; 2 Timothy 2:8-13; Luke 17:11-19

Gratitude Transforms*

In both of today's narratives we have an outsider. All of our texts speak about healing but none of them are about the miracle of healing. All of them are about thanksgiving.

Naaman was a general in the army of the king of Damascus. It was common in the days of Elisha the prophet for there to be raids from slave traders and for Damascus to exercise its will over Israel. Times of terror, terrible times. Naaman was part of the terror. He was an occupying general, not the sort of person a prophet of the God of Israel normally encourages. The oppressor is usually on the sharp end of the prophet's words.

But today we see Naaman listening and obeying Elisha. Why? Because he is in the grip of a life-shattering crises. His body has been colonized by leprosy, the ultimate alienating disease in the ancient world; the ancient world's AIDS. We meet Naaman as he emerges from the waters of the Jordan, healed, his flesh restored. We hear him as he tries to express his gratitude to Elisha, offering gifts in the flush of his newfound life. Elisha, whose name in Hebrew means, "God has saved", says, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing." Naaman, touched in the depth of his soul by Elisha's clarity of vision about his healing, makes another request. He asks if he may have some of the earth from this land that has made him whole again and take it back to Damascus, his homeland. Gratitude -- not healing -- is grounding. It restores life to us.

The Gospel gives us another story about leprosy, about healing and thanksgiving. It is also a story about an outsider who was filled with gratitude, a Samaritan.

There were ten lepers who came to Jesus when he was travelling through the region between Samaria and his homeland, the Galilee. The lepers greeted him the way we do: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" This is the only prayer. All other prayer flows from it and one's life is reoriented around this prayer. And so it was for one of the ten, the Samaritan, an outcast among outcasts, on this day in which they were all made whole.

We read in the text that only one returns to Jesus, prostrate at Jesus feet and thanks him. Only the Samaritan returns. Only in the outcast among the outcasts does gratitude move to worship.

These readings are not about healing, as we normally understand it. They speak of that gratitude which reorients one's life. We are often healed and the miracle does nothing to reorient our life. We persist in the old land, in the world of self-interest, swirling around our own concerns. Healing - even of the deepest of social diseases - may restore one's body but seldom does it restore us to the divine and to creation.

The healing comes, and comes often. Healing is commonplace in our world. God's grace is constantly being poured out for us. Our deepest wounds, our deepest diseases, constantly anointed. Only the outsider, the outcast of the outcasts, awakens to that gratitude born of hearing in the depth of the soul, "have mercy on me." Only the outcast of the outcasts sings the Gospel Acclamation, "For all things give thanks to God."

Gratitude is the gateway to worship. Through gratitude the outcast of the outcasts enters the newness of life, present to God's creation.

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