Spirituality
Guest Voices
Scripture for Life

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There is a story told about children on a school bus in Johannesburg shortly after apartheid ended in 1994. The bus driver could hear the children arguing about who should sit where. Someone piped up, “blacks in the back, whites in the front.” Disagreement could be heard all around. At the next stop, the driver stood up and faced his young passengers. “There are new rules in place now,” he said. “There is no more black and white, no more segregation. We are, all of us, experiencing a new beginning. We are all green with new life.” After he resumed his seat, he heard a small voice saying, “Dark green in the back, light green up front.”

This little anecdote evokes the human penchant for cultivating an “us and them” mentality. It also affirms the fact that even though a law may be propagated, full implementation of that law is not automatic. In South Africa, just as in the United States, when segregation was declared unjust and unlawful, it took time for centuries-old prejudices to cease.

In the ancient world, some among Jesus’ contemporaries had grown up with such a mentality, and it was difficult to overcome. For centuries, the Jews had been accustomed to their special role as God’s chosen people. They were to be uniquely instrumental in God’s plan of salvation for all people. However, at times, they regarded this unique responsibility more as a privilege. Those whom God had so blessed and graced began to think in terms of “us and them,” with “us” being far

better than “them.” Perhaps some had begun to lose sight of the fact that God’s choice was precisely that — God’s choice. Not merited or even deserved, God’s choice was rooted in God’s loving prerogative and was to be gratefully welcomed as a gift.

Just as each of us needs reminding as to who we are in God’s eyes, so also were our ancient forebears gently reminded: “It was not because you are the largest of all nations that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you, for you are really the smallest of all nations. It was because the Lord loved you and because of God’s fidelity to the oath God had sworn to your fathers. … Understand then that the Lord your God is the faithful God who keeps his merciful covenant down to the thousandth generation” (Deuteronomy 7:7-9).

With these thoughts in mind, our ancestors in the faith were to realize that though their role was special in God’s eyes, so all the nations of the earth were special unto God and were to be respected as such. When these thoughts are forgotten, prejudice can find a foothold — the type of prejudice we see reflected in the sacred texts for today.

While telling the story of Naaman the leper, the author of 2 Kings was well aware that his readers would have regarded Naaman as doubly disadvantaged and doubly disdained. Not only did he suffer from a debilitating disease that caused him to be ostracized from a society that feared contagion, he was also a foreigner whom the Israelites regarded as outside the pale of salvation. Nevertheless, God’s action in this regard affirmed that no person is beyond the scope of God’s concern. Finding himself cured, Naaman believed and was converted to the God of all creation and of all humankind. He was no longer black or white, or dark green or light green; Naaman was God’s own and one in whom the tender mercies of God were being revealed. If God has no favorites, how can we? If God ignores no one, how dare we?

Similarly, in the Lucan Gospel, the grateful Samaritan leper healed by Jesus is held forth not as a victim of a dread disease or a despised foreigner but as one whom God loves. Like so many other unlikely people throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, he was the one in whom the all-inclusive mercies of God were being revealed through Jesus.

If God has no bias or prejudice, neither can we, if we profess to believe in God. If God loves unconditionally and without measure, so should we who call ourselves God’s own. Because God has repeatedly assured us, “I have loved you with an

everlasting love, I have called you and you are mine!" so we are to assure one another. (See "I Have Loved You," song by Michael Joncas, based on Jeremiah 31:3.) You are mine, God says to each of us. If all of us are God's beloved possessions, let us revere one another as sacred places where God has chosen to dwell, now and forever.

2 KINGS 5:14-17

Elisha, Elijah's successor, was active in the northern kingdom of Israel for approximately 50 years (ca. 850-800 B.C.E.). He spoke with power, as did his mentor. Because of his courage and wondrous deeds, he became a legendary figure, championed by the poor, who were often the recipients of his graced actions.

Although he was not poor economically, Naaman, the Syrian commander in the army of King Ben-hadad II (cf. 2 Kings 8:7), came to Elisha for healing. He was a leper. Most scholars agree that Naaman probably did not have Hansen's disease per se, but one of the many other ailments included under the umbrella term of leprosy.

Naaman had learned about Elisha from an Israelite slave girl who was his wife's servant. With permission and a letter from his king, and with the encouragement of his family and friends, Naaman set off for Samaria. Once there, Naaman presented himself to the king of Israel (probably Jehoram), who took offense at his request and supposed that the Arameans were trying to pick a fight. Who could fulfill such a request?

When Elisha got wind of this, he asked that Naaman be sent to him. Without even coming out of his house to greet his important visitor, Elisha sent word telling the Syrian commander to wash in the Jordan. Since the cure wasn't going the way he imagined it should, Naaman grew angry and said he could just as well wash in the rivers back home. Only at the urging of his servants did he acquiesce and do as he was directed. Today's first reading picks up the story at this point.

In the act of being healed physically, Naaman was also spiritually awakened to the power of the God of Israel, whom he acclaimed as the one true God. As if to pay for the wonder of his healing, the soldier offered the prophet a gift, which Elisha refused. It was through his faith and not his wallet that Naaman would appropriate the priceless gift of God. Reflecting the ancient notion of the territoriality of the gods' powers, Naaman took home with him some of the earth from Israel in order to

fashion an altar and worship Israel's God. Naaman's statement "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15) reflects the Deuteronomist's conviction regarding the universal scope of God's concerns. All are God's creatures; all are God's concern. By telling this story of how a foreigner and outsider was blessed with healing by God, the Deuteronomist was challenging his readers to strive to be universal and ecumenical in their attitudes and actions. The Lucan Jesus will repeat this challenge in today's Gospel. Just as God, through Elisha, healed a Syrian soldier, so would God, through Jesus, heal a Samaritan leper.

2 Timothy 2:8-13

The majority of scholars support a Deutero-Pauline authorship and an early second-century C.E. date for the pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus). Those same scholars acknowledge that the letters are completely infused with Pauline thought and contain some authentic Pauline passages. One of those passages is today's second reading. Because of the tone of finality reflected in this text, many think of it as Paul's farewell letter to Timothy.

Imprisoned in Rome near the end of his life, Paul was concerned with ensuring that those whom he had brought to Christ would remain faithful to the good news as he had preached it among them. Confident that the Gospel would continue to be proclaimed despite the deaths of some of its preachers ("the word of God is not chained," v. 9), Paul urged Timothy and his congregation in Ephesus to accept their sufferings, as he did, as an inevitable factor in the church's development.

Moreover, the great apostle to the gentiles reminded his readers of the power of God's word to speak, to be realized, to grow and adapt to changing times and places. God's creative and salvific word had become incarnate, enfleshed in the person and mission of Jesus Christ. Paul also understood that it was and is the responsibility and privilege of every believer to hear and heed that word, to assimilate it into our lives and to speak it in every season, to every person, in every place until all may know what God wishes to say to humankind.

In the second part of this pericope (v. 13-15), the sacred author has quoted an early Christian hymn that celebrated the Lord's nearness to those who faithfully lived and preached the good news. Clearly, the reference to dying and rising with the Lord is a sacramental one; at baptism, believers die with Christ and rise with him to new life. Also included in this reference are the many dyings and risings that constitute the life of the disciple. The sufferings inherent in discipleship are daily experiences of

death, whereas the joys of serving and belonging to Christ are little tastes of resurrection.

“If we deny him, he will deny us” (v. 12) may seem to contradict the statement “If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful” (v. 13). Perhaps we can better understand this apparent inconsistency when we view it in light of Jesus’ absolute faithfulness to God and to God’s will. Those who belong to Jesus are called to be absolutely responsive to him. To deny his call — to refuse to hear and proclaim the message of Jesus — is possible because of the free will with which each person is endowed. In the unhappy event that a person freely chooses to deny Christ, that person has also freely chosen to be denied by Christ.

God willing, this will never be our choice. Nevertheless, the words of this early hymn offer a sobering reminder that freedom can be misused. Therefore, it devolves upon each of us to remain faithful and to persevere in every trial so that Jesus, who is ever faithful, will welcome us with open arms when the time of our dissolution draws near … for we are his, and he cannot deny himself.

LUKE 17:11-19

A narrative particular to Luke’s Gospel, the story of the 10 lepers has traditionally been regarded as a moralizing example affirming gratitude as the appropriate attitude toward God’s blessings. While this lesson is important, it is not the only one Luke intended. In the simple statement “He was a Samaritan” (v. 16) and in the three rhetorical questions that followed (“Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God? — vv. 17-18), the evangelist has broadened the application of his narrative.

Besides the necessity of gratitude, Luke affirmed: (1) the universality of God’s saving concerns: All were to share in the messianic blessings of healing and wholeness, even Samaritans; (2) the contrast between the Jewish rejection of Jesus and his acceptance by those not regarded as belonging to God’s chosen ones; (3) the difference between being healed and being saved.

Scholars would have us be mindful that there are two miracles being celebrated in this Gospel: The obvious one is Jesus’ healing of the 10 lepers; less obvious, but much more significant, is the coming to faith of the healed Samaritan leper. The other nine lepers had experienced the same healing as they were on their way to be declared ritually clean by the priests and free to rejoin the community. However,

only the Samaritan returned to Jesus. His action was explained and affirmed by Jesus: “Your faith has saved you” (v. 19).

In returning to Jesus, the Samaritan was acknowledging what God had done for him in Jesus and, for his faith, he experienced salvation beyond the physical cure. Healing issues forth in salvation when God’s gracious initiative is recognized and when one’s response to that initiative is faith. Because the Samaritan had faith, he was healed *and* saved.

Often the champion of foreigners, the Lucan Jesus held out the Samaritan leper as an example and a learning experience for his disciples. Rather than follow their centuries-old traditions and shun the Samaritan as unclean, the disciples could learn from the Samaritan’s humility in coming to Jesus. They could learn from his faith, which was willing to recognize God’s hand at work in a most unlikely person.

Many regard this narrative as a foreshadowing of some people’s eventual rejection of Jesus and the Gospel, and others’ enthusiastic reception of Jesus and the good news. For Luke’s contemporaries in the 80s C.E., this incident also helped to formulate a missiology. Jesus’ disciples were to spread the seed of the Gospel among all people and places, without discrimination or preconceptions about the results. If these seeds were rejected, the disciples were to move on. When the seeds were welcomed, even tentatively, they were to do all they could to help the seeds to grow and develop. They were to preach, teach and baptize, to visit and revisit the hearers so that the seed might flourish.

This initial missiology has not changed. We, too, are sent forth to plant, to water, to prune and to feed, remembering all the while that God gives the growth.

Planning: 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Lawrence Mick

Both the first reading and the Gospel today present stories of lepers being healed, which might make this a good day to focus on care of the sick and the sacrament of anointing. Even though it has been many decades since this sacrament was revised after Vatican II, ignorance of its true purpose is widespread in the Catholic community.

Far too many people still wait until the sick person is at death's door before requesting the anointing. Some of this may be a reversion to old patterns at a stressful time, but it also indicates a woefully inadequate catechesis of the faithful.

The anointing of the sick is, as its name implies, a sacrament for the sick, not specifically for the dying. There will always be emergency situations when the specter of death arrives unexpectedly, and the anointing may be appropriate at such times. But far more often, the anointing should be celebrated long before a person stands at death's door. It is a sacrament of the sick, and it seeks healing of body and spirit.

Some catechesis on this sacrament may be very appropriate today. People need to relearn the meaning of the anointing when they are not at a time of extreme stress, with the death of a loved one imminent. They need to learn that the proper sacrament of the dying is Viaticum, reception of the Eucharist as death approaches. This does not mean that a dying person cannot be anointed, and it may be helpful to do so if the dying person can no longer receive the Eucharist. But if that person has been anointed earlier (even several times), then Viaticum is the fitting sacrament. Even if the person cannot receive the Eucharist, the ritual offers prayers for the dying, which may be more appropriate than another anointing.

Experiential catechesis is powerful, so planners might consider offering the anointing during Mass — perhaps at one principal Mass or at all the Masses this weekend. Take care not to suggest that everyone should be anointed; the sacrament is for those seriously ill. But make it clear that it is for *all* who are seriously ill, not just the dying. Since the seriousness of an illness is a matter of judgment, presiders should generally trust people's decision to seek the sacrament once it has been explained.

Though you might take a break today from election issues, you could call attention to the universal right to basic health care with an item in the bulletin or an insert. Catholic teaching is clear that such care is a fundamental right, not a privilege for the wealthy.

Prayers: 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Two stories of healing in today's readings have common threads. Both Naaman and the Samaritan are outsiders, judged by some as unworthy of healing. But the faith of each is related to God's healing, and that healing leads to expressions of gratitude. God's gifts are freely given to surprising people in surprising ways. Faith is an essential component. But even more important is gratitude.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you healed the ten lepers who asked for your pity: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you praised the one who returned to give thanks: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call all of us to faith and gratitude: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider: Brothers and sisters, let us pray for those in need and in thanksgiving for all things that call for our gratitude.

Minister: For all baptized Christians, that we may be a people of gratitude for all God has done for us … we pray,

- For gratitude that there is peace, wherever it may be found — even in a world with war and conflict … we pray,
- For gratitude as we recognize the gift of healing in anyone who has suffered from illness, addiction, depression or any kind of pain … we pray,
- For instruments of God's healing: for doctors and nurses, therapists and counselors, researchers and spiritual guides … we pray,
- For our Jewish brothers and sisters, who commemorate this week the most holy penitential Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur … we pray,
- For wisdom among our electorate, who will soon make decisions for the future of our country … we pray,
- For all in our midst who are burdened in any way; and for those who have died … *(names)* … we pray,

Presider: God of healing, your gifts are freely given, but not always gratefully received. Help us to remember all that you do for us. Make us generous in our view of others, whose faith we may not recognize. We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

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