

28th Sunday Ord. Time (C)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
October 8, 9, 2016

Four weeks ago, in mid-September we heard the story of the rich man and the beggar. Recall how the beggar sat at the rich man's door, and that the rich man did not seem to notice the beggar camped out there. If he did, the gospel reports that he did not respond to the beggar's need; he did not even offer the beggar the crumbs from his table. Both the beggar and the rich man die; the poor man goes to heaven, and the rich man to hell. We are then told that there is a great chasm between them, so great that neither can go from one place to the other. The rich man cannot get to where the beggar is, and the beggar cannot get to where the rich man is, even to help him.

Looking back on that story, I wonder about the rich man and the beggar: 'what, if anything, would it take to bridge the gap between where these two are?' Granted it would need to take place while they were still living on this earth. After their deaths, it seems, things were pretty much set: the poor man was in happiness and the rich man was in torment. I came to wondering about this when thinking especially about the individuals in today's gospel, the one who returned to give thanks and the nine who did not who maybe simply returned to their homes. They grabbed and ran; they took and used! Did they think they were somehow owed this cleansing? What is it called today? Entitlement!

In commenting on today's gospel, Sr. Dianne Bergant and Fr. Richard Fragomeni suggest an interesting process: not an easy one, but one that makes a good deal of sense to me ...not merely in my head, but from much of my pastoral experience as well. It is a process of Christian conversion; a process that moves from 'separation from God through sin' to the ultimate of 'new life in glory' with God in the Kingdom of heaven. It is the process all of us must make if we are serious about responding to Jesus and His call to discipleship, if we are serious about traveling with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Using the stories of Naaman and the 10 individuals featured in the gospel it goes like this:

The leprosy of Naaman and the 10 completely separated them from life. They could not go into any part of society due to the highly contagious nature of their disease. And there was nothing they could do themselves to be rid of the disease. For the rest of their lives, they were alienated from normal life. It is a strong metaphor for the effect of sin in our own lives. Sin separates us from God, and makes us unfit for the presence of God. This is not the individual sin that too often monopolizes our concern, ...missing daily prayers, saying a nasty or curt word to someone ... it is more about the attitude of basically ignoring God until we are in a

desperate jam, holding attitudes of prejudice toward entire classes of people and ethnicities and allowing culture, rather than the Good News of the Gospel, to form our consciences. This is the real sinfulness that separates us from God. (ex. Trump and Clinton: language against women and email controversy what is it that lies beneath these external matters that we are seeing ... what attitudes, traits in these two persons is the real issue, rather than simply the external things we hear and now know about.

Naaman and the 10, recognizing their hopeless conditions and their helplessness to do anything about it themselves, go to the prophet Elisha and to Jesus for the healing power of God. They were open to the preaching and to the power that these could bring to them. They are transformed and made ready to receive the glory of God. In the same way, when we are open to the Good News of Jesus we can be transformed and become recipients of God's grace. Already we are in areas that many today no longer give consideration to ... our sinfulness and our need of God's grace. Many today think they are doing 'okay' and have little or no appreciation of God's saving grace. Another important element here is that in the case of both Naaman and the 10 individuals, they needed to step out of their element to be cleansed. Their cure did not come from anyone in their own social group. They all made a conscious decision that they were in need, and that they needed to reach out to someone beyond themselves. It is the story of the prodigal son: he couldn't fix himself; he needed to go to his father ... and we take our sin to the Father in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The next step in this process of conversion is the step of gratitude and praise. Naaman and the lone Samaritan are so filled with gratitude that they return to the one responsible for their healing. They are not so preoccupied with receiving what they wanted for themselves that they overlook or forget that their new health is a complete gift. More than simply being overwhelmed with joy at their cures, they were filled with gratitude ... the kind of gratitude that brings us here each week ... to lift up our hearts and give thanks to God in the Eucharist.

At the end of this process, these individuals stepped over a threshold into a new way of living. Their thanks and praise usher them into a new age of end-time promise. Once again, we tend to over-simplify this process, more or less assuming that we live an okay life, die and then immediately bounce into heaven. We deny the mystery of the process ... that it is in Jesus and our entering into the mystery of Jesus personally that matters. It begins in baptism, and continues each day of our baptismal living. It is celebrated here each weekend, and periodically as we confess our need to be cured in Reconciliation. Always, however, in and with the power of Jesus. Hear again a bit of St. Paul's words: "If we have died with Christ, we shall also live with Christ; if we persevere we shall also reign with Christ."