

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

II Kings 5: 14-17

Psalm 98: 1-4

II Tim 2: 8-13

Luke 17: 11-19

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We live in a society that pays too much attention to great events. The media has the power to make big things out of small ones. Thus, we miss those every day events that fill our human experiences. For example looking a sunset, having a conversation with a good friend, having a good family reunion. These are ordinary events in which we can see the presence of God. But how can we show our gratitude? How do we recognize what Christ has done for us in the ordinary events of our live? Today we turn towards the outsider. Certainly the first and the third readings, about the Syrian general Naaman and the Samaritan leper, focus our attention upon the salvation and faith of the person on the fringe, the forgotten man or woman, the impossible one, the hopeless one, the no-person, the outcast. While lepers were isolated from normal society, this Samaritan would have been despised even by others lepers ! This excessive isolation may have been his salvation, enabling him to think independently and then to break rank from the other nine to give thanks to God. Strangely this Samaritan leper without a name eventually shows up with a more distinctive personality than the Syrian general named Naaman. The interaction with Jesus made the difference.

In mediating upon these scriptures and this topic, it is helpful to remember that some part of ourselves may be the outsider or the rejected outcast. This stranger within us may be an inspiration, wonderful in itself yet very difficult in its demands: for instance, to step forward and act for the sake of a defenseless person, or to undertake a difficult response to others, like forgiveness, or help, or concern, or just a listening ear. The “foreign” part in ourselves can be an inspiration to spend more time in prayer. Unfortunately, we can cast it aside, avoiding our responsibility, shouting out “Not me!”

The outsider may literally be a stranger whom we habitually ignore or even reject. Or again this person may be our own self. The outsider can come forward from the creaks in our bones! Since it involves a very special inspiration and belongs to our deepest personality, we need direction to recognize the stranger.

The first quality, strangely enough, is gratitude. A grateful person is usually that one who does not take anything for granted. Such people have an eye to see what is being done for them. They realize that long preparations take place before they sit down to eat! The

careful planning before a family reunion or a parish bazaar makes them appreciate the unnamed workers behind the scenes. These grateful people, therefore, discover what most of us overlook, and they express their joy and appreciation.

Grateful people are usually optimistic people. They can anticipate the good which others are capable of doing. Not only the Samaritan but all ten lepers saw in Jesus the kindly person capable and willing to heal their disease. Similarly, some people have the wonderful insight to see and encourage great potential in others.

By gratitude then we are disposed to recognize talents and good disposition in others, which they may have been overlooking and reducing to “outsiders.” Moreover, with all the more enthusiasm we honor this hidden part of them when we attribute the gift to God’s generosity. The Samaritan “came back praising God.” Naaman declared that his cure shows “that there is no God...except in Israel.” Such praise of God not only enhances the hidden gift in the other person, but also gives a note of urgency to act upon it.

A good memory is also important to recognize the outsider and to allow this hidden aspect of ourselves or of others to reach full maturity. Memory is the ability to draw upon the best of one’s life and one’s tradition. Memory says: look what wonderful things you have already done; this proves you can do still more wonderful things, so do not give up. Memory is at the heart of biblical religion as we recall God’s great redemptive acts and repeat them “in memory of me.” Naaman does not want ever to forget. When the prophet Elijah refused the gift. Naaman wanted this tangible memory of the promised land, so as to worship this God of many promises and hopes. Naaman would never again want to be the outsider but rather would continuously locate the stranger in himself or in others and bring them “home” to this little plot of promised earth.

Finally, as I implied at the start, we are often afraid to locate the stranger for fear of the demands upon us. At the very least the outsider will upset our schedule; normally this castoff will require much attention. In some very real way, the stranger may imprison, may even put upon us some of his ignominy and shame. We become contaminated by the leper and by the foreigner. Such too was the case of Paul in writing to Timothy:

“In preaching the Gospel I suffer as a criminal, even to the point of being thrown into chains.”

Our suffering on earth enables the stranger and outsider to find themselves, their true self, their hidden potential. What was hidden is found for eternal glory. Let us focus not in the miraculous acts that we find in our readings, but in the gratitude shown by each one of those persons. It is this gratitude which leads them to understand not only that they were healed, but also to realize that though this they found God’s salvation, which is for all peoples. Then we will be able to say, like the psalmist, “The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power.”