

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL - 9 October 2022
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - Lectionary 28

1st Reading: *II Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c*

Psalm: 111

2nd Reading: *II Timothy 2:8-15*

Gospel: *Luke 17:11-19*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This past Wednesday our daughter Rachel underwent a 7-hour surgery to remove cancer from her colon and her liver. The surgery went very well, and she is recuperating, though in quite a bit of pain. She will still be in the hospital for a few more days, then will be convalescing at home, with Coral being with her much of the time to help with our grandchildren, as she regains her strength.

Coral and I want to thank you all so much for all your prayers, and even moreso we want to thank God for his healing, and for his guidance given to Rachel's doctors, who have been God's instruments in her continued healing. This healing has been quite miraculous, and following in the footsteps of Naaman, the Gentile, and the unknown Samaritan, both healed of their leprosy in today's Scripture readings, we want to praise God with a loud voice and thank Jesus for his wonderful grace.

In April, when it was discovered that Rachel had cancer, the doctors were very grim, giving her only a few months to live. But she responded so well to the chemotherapy they gave her, that they decided it would be possible to remove the cancer surgically, something we were initially told would be virtually impossible in cases like Rachel's. And now, six months later, the cancer has been removed and her outlook for the future looks very good indeed.

It would be easy to take all of this for granted. Medical scientists have made such strides in cancer treatments that we are tempted to think that amazing results should simply be expected. And even if this were not the case, we might also sit back and assume that because we are Christians, God will automatically give us whatever we want. Some people might say that we ought to be able to "claim" our miracle because of our great faith.

But such healings are not just to be taken for granted. The people in our readings this morning, Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, who suffered from leprosy, and ten other lepers on the border between Galilee and Samaria, had earnestly entreated God to heal them of their leprosy.

There was no cure for leprosy in those days, and those who contracted the disease were doomed to live out the rest of their lives as their skin slowly decayed. It was the most dreaded disease of the time, just as cancer is now the most dreaded disease of our day.

Naaman, a man of position and power, had heard from his servant girl that the prophet Elisha had performed many miracles as God's prophet, and she had given Naaman hope that Elisha would be able to cure his leprosy. And the ten lepers in our Gospel had heard about the miracles Jesus had performed, and so they, too, had begged for God's mercy.

Well, Naaman, being an army commander, was a little more forceful than just begging, he pretty much demanded that Elisha heal him, but the very fact that he had come hundreds of miles hoping to be cured, shows that he did have some faith. And he was put in his place for his arrogant demand, since Elisha didn't even come out to meet him, or "wave his hand" over Naaman's leprosy as he was expecting, and in the end Naaman did humbly follow Elisha's command to wash in the Jordan River.

The ten lepers in our Gospel, social outcasts with no position whatsoever, kept their own distance from Jesus, as was expected of lepers, lest they spread the disease to others, yet this did not stop them from crying out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

And God did heal Naaman, and Jesus did heal the ten lepers. But God did not *have to* perform these miracles. It isn't that Naaman's task of washing in the Jordan River was a magic spell that *had* to work. I am sure there were countless lepers who had washed in the Jordan, and yet had remained leprous. Nor was it the case that Jesus *had* to heal these ten particular lepers.

And we may note that these lepers had not even finished doing the task set before them, of showing themselves to the priest, before they were fully healed. So it is not that these actions - washing in the Jordan, or going to the priest - were magical spells that caused God to act. We most certainly do not *control* God.

It is by God's mercy and by his grace that these lepers were healed. And it is by God's mercy and grace that Rachel is being healed of her cancer. But does this mean that all the prayers and the entreaties didn't matter, that God was going to heal them all anyway?

Well, not necessarily. Elisha didn't just decide out of the blue to heal this Syrian commander. Naaman did *ask* that God would heal him (even if it was a humbling experience to ask rather than demand), and the ten lepers in the Gospel did call out, asking for healing. God *wants* us to ask for his mercy and his grace. We are to have a relationship with God, not just use him as a tool to get what we want.

Jesus tells us elsewhere that we are to ask God the Father for good things, just as we would ask our earthly fathers for a favour. Our fathers might be very willing to do good for us, but we still need to ask them. All of us, and all of those in other churches, who have prayed to God for Rachel, have asked God for his mercy.

But what is really striking in both the readings this morning is not what led up to the healings, but what happened after them. Again, God wants to have a relationship with us, and if we just take his gifts and then go on our merry way, we are shunning that relationship.

What did Naaman do after he was healed? He did a very strange thing. He loaded up two mules with as much dirt as they could carry to take back to Syria with him, so that he could show his gratitude and his faith in the God of Israel who had saved him, by worshipping on soil of Israel. It was the way that he could acknowledge that Yahweh, the God of Israel, was the true God.

And then we have the Gospel reading. Instead of such a lavish display of gratitude, nine out of the ten lepers whom Jesus had healed did simply go on their merry way, without even thanking Jesus. Their healing wasn't taken away from them, but they missed out on having a true relationship with Jesus. They did take their God for granted.

But the one Samaritan, the one outsider, as soon as he saw that he was healed, ran back to Jesus, "prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him, praising God with a loud voice." Not only was he healed, but he realised what a wonderful thing it was to worship this God who wants to be our Father in every way.

And so, as I said at the beginning of this message, we want to thank you all so much for all your prayers, and we praise God for his healing. We do not have any dirt from Israel on which to worship, but we do have some crosses from Israel, made of olive wood, that we sometimes hold when we pray, and together with you, we are able to worship God through the liturgy of the church and through the hymns we sing. Thanks be to God!

Amen!