

6 Epiphany – Year B – February 18, 2009 - Homily
2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45
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Are you a “somebody” or a “nobody”? That question is a bit like asking whether you are the kind of person who sees a half a glass of water and thinks of the glass as half-full or half empty. Actually, depending on your perspective, we could all answer “both”! There is an old cartoon – I’m pretty sure it was a Calvin & Hobbes one -- that includes a dialogue about relative worth. The conclusion is hopeful, saying something like, “I must be a somebody, because God don’t make no trash.”

There are two stories of two leprous men in this week’s readings. One is a “somebody” of his day. His name is recorded for all history to know. It is Naaman, and he is described as a “great man and in high favor with his master”. He is actually a Syrian, commander of the army of the king of Aram. The other is a nameless man, by which we might assume he is a relative “nobody”. He is simply described as a leper. Yet he has the courage to come and kneel before Jesus and beg for cleansing. The former serves a powerful king and therefore has access to great riches. Naaman’s master the king of Aram seeks to buy his cure through the king of Israel and the intercession of God’s prophet Elisha. The latter has nothing to offer except his faith in Jesus.

The healing of Naaman through the prayers of the prophet Elisha is conducted by messenger with instructions to wash seven times in the River Jordan. The simplicity of the command infuriates Naaman who clearly believes that he deserves, at the very minimum, a personal interview with Elisha. It is also clear that within his own culture there is substantial superstitious clutter around healing, with the kind of mysterious magical elements associated with a false elevation of the role and power of the person praying for healing. Elisha’s refusal to be placed on a pedestal as a magical healer is precisely in line with the lesson Naaman must learn about the true source of healing, and to whom the thanks and praise must be directed.

The truth is that those who offer the laying on of hands or the prayers for healing are merely conduits of God’s abundant grace. In fact, that is why healing can occur remotely or for someone we pray for that we don’t even know, purely because it is God who is the true and only healer. Naaman is unable to thank anyone except the God of Israel for his healing and that is also part of what Naaman, you and I are called to see in this passage. The simplicity of the healing, according to God’s command tells us that God is all powerful, and that God desires and is working towards healing for everyone, as well as restoration of the whole of creation. The healing of Naaman, the “somebody”, has frequently been interpreted to show how Israel is a light to the Gentiles, drawing all nations to be reconciled with the one true God.

On the other hand, we have the healing of the unnamed leper by Jesus. As a faithful Israelite, living under the law, he is told to go and make an offering to the priests for his cleansing, just as Moses commanded. In whatever manner he has heard about Jesus’ healing powers, it is his confident faith that has compelled him to fall on his knees before Jesus. In our faith, you and I have come to realize Jesus is fully divine as well as fully human, and the words he uses in cleansing the leper have at least two implications. That Jesus speaks as God speaks is without doubt and so we have the affirmation of the story of that other healing: God does desire and consistently chooses healing for all His children. In Naaman’s story, however, there is no physical contact between Elisha and Naaman. In the story of Jesus and the leper – Jesus does touch the man. So what is the difference? The obvious answer is that in the Gospel story, it’s Jesus! But there are other healings in the Gospels where Jesus simply says the word and the person is healed, and so we know that Jesus did not need to touch the leper for God to work the miracle of healing in this man of faith. So why does Jesus touch this “nobody”?

His touch serves at least two purposes. The first we talked about on Sunday is a clear message

to the Pharisees about breaking down the onerous barriers that they have set up around their interpretation of the purity laws. In short, the person and relationships are far more important than the human-designed legalism that has removed this man from the love and care of his community. The second comes from understanding what the word “touched” also means, and hence the meaning conveyed in the Greek to those who heard this Gospel and understood the nuances of the original language. In fact, this understanding also explains why the man probably could not resist sharing word of his healing. The way in which Jesus touches this man goes far deeper than a laying on of hands. It is a spiritual touch as much as a physical one. The essence of the touch is highly intimate. We know this because this word is also used to describe sexual intercourse. However, in terms of how God touches us, the closest analogy that captures the way Jesus took hold of this man – both physically and spiritually – is the unbreakable bond that adheres our souls to God our creator and redeemer. The same type of yearning that Augustine describes as the restless search we all undergo in life, until our souls rest in God. The unnamed leper has come in faith, and his soul recognizes Jesus as God. After his gracious cleansing, he is filled with such gratitude in response to Jesus and God, that he goes about telling everyone he meets the Good News. His joy is not so much compelled by evidence, as an acceptance in faith of God’s constant invitation to claim his healing – that is in other words his salvation.

One final thought for us all to consider. As the unnamed leper discovered, healing is not just about physical healing. Some of the most important healing that happens in our lives is spiritual, psychological or emotional healing, and social healing. Social healing is the restoration of relationships and our reconciliation with God and community. We claim all of these miracles of God’s gift of healing when we choose to see God at work in our lives and in the lives of others. God’s invitation to healing and salvation is an open one. You are invited. I am invited. Whether we think of ourselves as a “somebody” or a “nobody” God knows us for the precious and beautiful child we truly are in His sight.

Amen.