

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 28<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY -C-**  
2 Kings 5: 14-17 2 Timothy 2: 8-13 Luke 17:11-19  
*By Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

Is there a divine ego trip going on in today's gospel passage? Why is it important that God be “glorified”? Why does Jesus want to be thanked for his cure of the lepers, especially since he just told the 10 to go show themselves to the priests? Aren't the others just doing what he told them to do--- except for the one Samaritan who “disobeys” and returns? The bible seems to be permeated with scenes or statements that reveal God wants to be thanked and glorified. Why does God want all this attention and acknowledgment in the first place? These are my thoughts upon first reading the cure of the ten lepers. I wonder if similar questions might not arise in the congregation today when this story is proclaimed?

Even the most casual bible reader knows that to have leprosy was to be an outcast in Jesus' day. The leper was expected to stay apart from the community and cry “Unclean, unclean,” to warn others of his/her disease. A priest would have to pronounce the leper clean, and the leper would have to make prescribed offerings before being welcomed back into the community's social and religious life (Lv. 14: 1-32). So, we can understand Jesus' telling the lepers to show themselves to the priests. He not only wanted to cure them, he wanted them accepted back into their community. (We can see why sin is likened to leprosy, for it offends and cuts us off from the community. Forgiveness has not just personal but social consequences as well. It's like being cured of leprosy.) In addition, since illnesses were seen as a punishment from God for sin, if they got official religious recognition of their cure, it would be a sign to them, in their way of thinking, of God's forgiving them and receiving them back.

Jesus' sending the lepers to the priests shows he didn't want to break with the Jewish priesthood and the religious tradition into which he was born. Had the priests acknowledged the cure, they would also be recognizing Jesus' healing power as having its source in God. Presuming the nine made it to the priests, why didn't the acknowledgment and approbation of Jesus follow? Were the priests and the institutional religion holding too closely to the privileges that came with religious power? God's good will and benevolence are all too often thwarted by human blindness and recalcitrance. As one ordained in a church community, the story is a sobering reminder that I might not be open to God's actions when they occur outside my institutional confines. Rather, as in the case of the layman Jesus, God may very well be acting to heal and unify a broken people outside the sanctuary, on the “road”, the place where this miracle happened.

The lepers are “cleansed,” “as they were going.” So, the cure took place on their trip to the priests. We too are a community walking along together in need of healing. As we walk we talk. What happens as we go along? Plenty of evil and negative experiences, to be sure! But healings as well, for the Spirit works among us in our daily exchanges urging us to compassion, forgiveness, courage, steadfastness and the forming of closer human bonds. We walk along and, like the lepers, God is working to cleanse us. But note the response of the Samaritan leper: “realizing he had been healed.” The Samaritan wakes to a new realization. A healing has happened to him, and he knows the source. Through Jesus, God has acted to restore his life, indeed, to give him a new life with Jesus as his center. He “realizes” what has happened to him and he returns to the source to give thanks. God doesn’t need the glory; Jesus doesn’t need the thanks. But in glorifying and giving thanks we are rooting ourselves in the ever-deepening awareness of our relationship with the gracious God who constantly acts on our behalf to bring us to wholeness. That is why we gather today at Eucharist, we are calling to mind who our God is and what God has done for us, we the beloved community. As we say in the Preface today, “It is right O God, to give you thanks and praise.”

There is an easily missed detail--- it’s a Samaritan who returns. Jesus identifies him as such. We can presume, I think, that the other lepers were Jews. We know from the other gospel passages that Jews and Samaritans were enemies. (A Jew might insult someone by calling him/her a pig or a Samaritan. Those were insults of a high order.) Yet in this band of lepers, all were diseased, all were outcasts, the ancient hatreds had broken down. Why? Their affliction brought them together.

I remember talking with an inmate on San Quentin’s death row. We were in the yard, a chain linked fence that surrounded a basketball court and weight lifting area. It was his section’s turn for outdoor recreation. I noticed the mixture of whites, Hispanics and African Americans playing basketball together. Many were from different rival street gangs. I thought it unusual, not something you would see elsewhere in the prison, so I asked my friend about the unusual blending. He said, “Hey, we’re all in this together, we’re condemned men. The old stuff doesn’t hold in this yard.” I later learned what he said didn’t really hold true for all the inmates on the row, but it did for these 40 or 50. They were condemned, lepers in the eyes of society. Under such a shared dark faith, “the old stuff doesn’t hold in this yard.” Unfortunately, suffering sometimes teaches us lessons we don’t seem to learn any other way.

There are other stories like that: remember the Catholic and Protestant mothers in Northern Ireland who joined in their peacemaking efforts and won the Nobel Peace Prize? There are Palestinian and Jewish grandmothers who have suffered family loss in the conflict in their land

yet have joined their voices for reconciliation. Disasters often dissolve squabbles. The unfortunate Trade Center destructions have brought together a lot in New York City who came from different neighborhoods and suburbs, people who never mixed until their suffering and grief united them.

This band of lepers, who experienced suffering and expulsion were united in their misery. And they were cleansed. But note, one realizes he has been “healed.” That’s more profound than just a physical cleansing—a healing. The man’s next actions show the result of the realization of what really happened to him. He returns to glorify God and give thanks to Jesus. The leper sees that God has acted on his behalf. He also realizes that Jesus was the instrument of God’s healing. It’s as if he woke up from a terrible dream and from this moment his life is completely different; not just because of his cure, but now he sees his life anew in terms of Jesus. Jesus names what has been given the man: he can “stand up and go, your faith has saved you.” Do we realize the healing we have received on our journey, how God has acted through others to restore us, or do we chalk them up to our own efforts, plans and achievements?

The other nine lepers probably went about their lives. Certainly, there would be much now for them to do return to their families, kiss their children, or marry and start a family, find gainful employment, perhaps even return to the religious practice from which their leprosy had excluded them. But they would have missed the gift of deeper life that the Samaritan leper came to realize: God had loved him, and Jesus was the concrete sign of that love and acceptance. If at any time in the future he might sin and feel like the leper he used to be, he could always call on the name of Jesus and be healed again. Whenever his future thoughts would turn to God, Jesus would be part of the picture. Now he knew he would never have to feel cut off from God, now he knew how close he was to God for he would remember returning and getting close to Jesus, close enough to hear, “your faith has saved you”. He would know what a gift he had received, his faith would remind him of that gift. That’s why God calls us to glorify God and give thanks to Jesus. God wants to be in relationship with us and when we acknowledge the good gifts God has given us, we remember who we are, beloved of God. Or as John Kavanaugh says:

We will not take full possession of our lives until we learn to give thanks for them. We don’t really own our legs or eyes, our hands and skin unless we’re daily grateful we don’t really live with our loved ones unless we foster an appreciative, almost contemplative sensitivity to their presence. It is only the loss of them—or the threat of it—that shakes us into an awareness of their manifold grace....

Gratitude not only empowers the receiver of the gift; it confirms the giver. “You really believe I love you,” the giver says in the heart. It is glorious when someone thanks you. Might God be more interested in our gratitude than anything else? Was the primal sin

ingratitude? (pages 111-112 cf. below.)

Does it sound like Jesus is commissioning the cured leper? “Stand up and go.” Aren’t those the sounds of discipleship? He has been made confident of God’s love for him, confident enough to get up and go to live that love in the world. Jesus also says these words to us today. We are forgiven our sins at the Eucharist. Gift is given and gratefully received. Now he sends us back to where we live. “Stand up and go.” We, like the leper, “realize” what has been done for us and we go.

### **ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:**

John F. Kavanaugh, *THE WORD ENGAGED: MEDITATIONS ON THE SUNDAY SCRIPTURES, CYCLE C*. New York: Orbis Books, 1997. Paper, 128 pages, \$12.

A collection of the weekly reflections on the Sunday readings first published in AMERICA. These brief reflections reveal the writer’s personal engagement with the Word. He teaches at St. Louis University and also brings to these penetrating meditations his broad background in philosophy, social justice, literature and the arts.

### **JUSTICE NOTES**

As people of faith, we are convinced that "the earth is the Lord's and all it holds" (Ps 24:1). Our Creator has given us the gift of creation: the air we breathe, the water that sustains life, the fruits of the land that nourish us, and the entire web of life without which human life cannot flourish. All of this God created and found "very good." We believe our response to global climate change should be a sign of our respect for God's creation....

Global climate is by its very nature a part of the planetary commons. The earth's atmosphere encompasses all people, creatures, and habitats. The melting of ice sheets and glaciers, the destruction of rain forests, and the pollution of water in one place can have environmental impacts elsewhere. As Pope John Paul II has said, "*We cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the wellbeing of future generations.*" Responses to global climate change should reflect our interdependence and common responsibility for the future of our planet. Individual nations must measure their own self-interest against the greater common good and contribute equitably to global solutions.

-----U.S. Catholic Bishops, June 15, 2001