

The Other Nine Lepers

28th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year C

2 Kings 5:14-17
Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4

2 Timothy 2:8-13
Luke 17:11-19

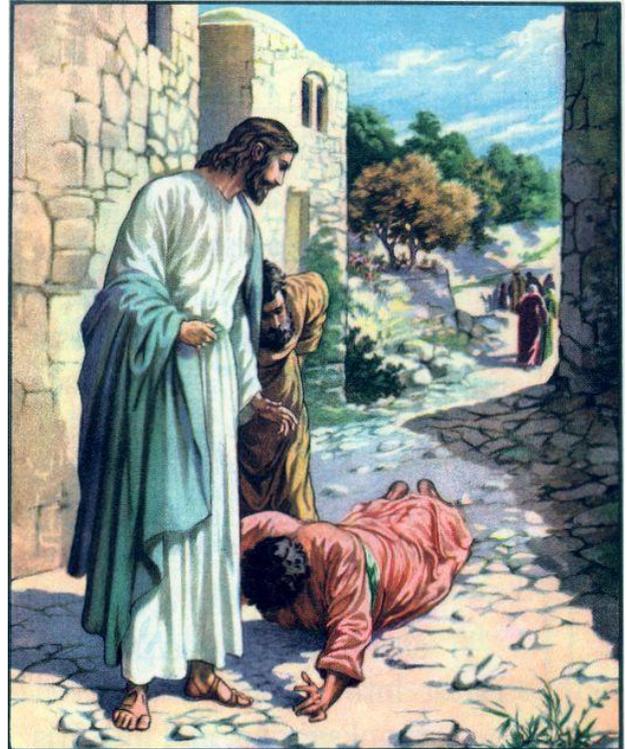
Why are we so hard those other nine?

I remember when, as a first grade student in Catholic School, I first learned the story of the Ten Lepers – how only one thought enough to come back and thank Jesus for curing him, while the other nine left without a thought. How appalling! How ungrateful can one get? However, as I grew older and began to notice some of the more intricate details of the story I began to wonder if perhaps we have been giving those other nine a raw deal. Even Jesus does not offer a criticism of the others, but merely asks a simple question – “*Where are the other nine?*”

The answer is simple. The other nine were doing exactly what Jesus commanded them to do – “*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*” This is consistent with the Law of Moses as we read it in Leviticus 13:16-17. If a person stricken with leprosy has been cured, it is the priest who verifies the cure and declares them “clean” and fit to return to society. Jesus commanded the lepers to carry out this command, and this is what they did. So let us not be too hard on those other nine. They were acting in obedience to Jesus’ instruction.

The one leper who returned, however, would have found himself in a particular position with regard to that command. As a Samaritan, he more than likely would not have been welcome in the synagogue or Temple, but would have been turned away at the door. (“Recall that Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans” – Jn 4:9) As such, the Samaritan leper had nowhere else to go. So he returned to Jesus to offer his personal thanks, since he could not do so according to the Mosaic Law.

What we have, then, in both the one leper who returned and the nine who “left” are



examples regarding prayer and thanksgiving that we all participate in as Catholics. The nine carried out what could be considered a legal or liturgical precept, conducted and verified by a religious leader. This is, in fact, what we do whenever we celebrate a liturgy, particularly the Mass, as a community of faith. The fact that it was nine who did this put their action in the context of community.

On the other hand, the Samaritan leper’s thanks was more personal, giving that thanks to the very source of his grace and cure. Because he was only one, his thanks was more of a personal nature, and this is what we do whenever we pray individually, or bring a personal investment to our liturgical celebrations.

In the story of the Ten Lepers we see the

The Ten Lepers

two forms of prayer we are called to live as people of faith. We are people of liturgy, with rites, precepts and obligations to fulfill as a community. However, we must also bring ourselves to our prayer in a very personal way, and not be limited to simply the carrying out of liturgical actions or the recitation of particular words. In the same way we are not to remain isolated in our spiritual life, but recognize our belonging to a community, and our call to join that community in prayer in and through the liturgies we celebrate and the worship in which we engage.

Sadly we can all relate to examples in which one side is exaggerated to the exclusion of the other. There are those whose approach to the Mass on Sunday is little more than a rigid habit done to fulfill an obligation. Even, perhaps especially, those who regularly arrive late for Mass and leave early, approach their attendance and participation with the age-old precept learned by all that “as long as I arrive in time for this part of the Mass and stay long enough for that part, I have fulfilled my Sunday Obligation.” Others may be present for the entire celebration, but treat the Mass as little more than a functional series of prayers before receiving communion. Of such people, Jesus may ask, “Where are the other nine? Is there no one who gives thanks?” While fulfilling a precept or obligation – as did the nine lepers – such people fail to bring the personal connection to God we all strive for, even in a communal, liturgical setting.

Another group, who exemplify the other

extreme, would be those who seldom fulfill communal obligations. Of these we often hear such lines as “I don’t attend Mass, but I still pray at home,” or “I do not abstain from meat on Lenten Fridays because I do not get anything out of it personally.” Even those who refuse to see the Mass as a communal celebration, but as a period for personal prayer fall into this category. Such individuals endeavor to personalize their relationship with God, but do so at the expense of the liturgical principles or communal observances that are meant to bring us together as community. To such as these, Jesus may ask, “Why did you not go with the other nine?”

As a community of faith
and a people called to
have a relationship with
God, we must aspire to
bring a balance to both
aspects of our prayer life.

Like the nine Lepers of the Gospel, we are called to fulfill the precepts that call us to a life of community. In doing so we carry out God’s command regarding our life and worship as Church. Yet, like the one Samaritan leper (whose options were very limited) we must also bring that personal touch in giving thanks to God

for the many blessings given us day by day, week by week, throughout the year and every moment of our lives.

So let us give the other nine lepers a break. Let us see ourselves in both the nine who “left” and the one who returned as we endeavor to be faithful to our call as a community of worship, while also bringing that individual touch of gratitude and love to the Savior who heals us.

Fr. William Nicholas
October 8, 2004