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(Dreamstime/Golfix)



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October 12, 2019

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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2 Kings 5:14-17

Psalms 98

2 Timothy 2:8-13

Luke 17:11-19

When was the last time you gave or received a kiss to make it better? Although science tells us that kissing can communicate 80 million bacteria, loving adults still kiss pint-size scraped knees, and it really does help. At the very least, it proves that we care and are not afraid of what hurt the little one. In today's Gospel, Jesus didn't act like Francis of Assisi and kiss the lepers, but one of the 10 got better than he asked for.

There's a lot of symbolic geography in today's Gospel. As Jesus nears Jerusalem and his ultimate trials, he enters a village that Luke leaves nameless so that we can all imagine it as a place we know. Ten lepers meet him. They remain at a distance, but call him by name; they knew about him and that gave them hope. They also called him "Master," appealing to him as someone with more power or authority than they had.

Using the word that came into our Latin liturgy as *eleison*, they ask for mercy (translated by our lectionary as pity). In Luke's Gospel, pity is what the father felt for his prodigal son when he was moved with motherly compassion. Mercy is even more active. Pity leads you to feel deeply for someone who is thirsty; mercy propels you into a search for water. The lepers asking for *eleison* wanted more than sympathy.

Jesus made no gesture and said no word of healing; he simply told them to go to Jerusalem and show themselves to the priest. Of course, that was forbidden; they couldn't go near others because they were lepers. They went away — whether feeling dismissed or hopeful, we have no idea.

We wouldn't know anything more except for the one fellow who didn't do what Jesus told him to do. When the Samaritan realized that they had all been cured, he turned his back on Jerusalem and approached Jesus in an attitude of worship, glorifying God and falling at his feet with *eucharisteo* — the Greek word for thanks.

Comparing this story and the child's scraped knee, we understand that all 10 lepers were cured: They all got disinfected. They had begged for mercy, and as they obeyed Jesus' order, the ravages of their disease disappeared and they became free to move about in society. Their lives were absolutely changed for the better. They could go back to being who they were before disease had redefined them.

This one fellow realized that Jesus not only cured him but offered him a relationship of mercy — something far more valuable than the approval of the priests. He knew he would never be the same again, so he went back to Jesus.

Seeing the grateful Samaritan, Jesus must have felt the same conflicting emotions he often felt when trying to teach his closest disciples. He had responded to 10 cries for mercy, and 90% of the petitioners simply went their way after being helped. They obtained what they asked for and didn't look further.

Then there was one who "got it." He understood that in Jesus' eyes his identity as a Samaritan and/or leper was meaningless. The Samaritan realized that Jesus' mercy was an ongoing offer. By receiving Jesus' mercy, he was redefined and entered into a new, reciprocal relationship with Jesus, the Master.

But one guy was different. Something more happened to him in the process. As a Samaritan, he knew what it was to be an outcast even before he became diseased. Somehow, he perceived more than the others. He wasn't just disinfected but touched profoundly by Jesus' mercy. It healed him of everything that banishment had ever done to him, everything that set him apart and made him feel unworthy.

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We usually interpret this story as a lesson about gratitude, but that might be selling it short. What was it like from Jesus' point of view? Jesus never asked for gratitude. John quotes him as saying, "I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly." In this episode, Jesus saw that nine people got restored to their old life

and one was open to real abundance.

Perhaps this incident is supposed to teach us that God gives us life, hoping that, like the Samaritan, we will really get it — in abundance.

Each time we celebrate the liturgy, we pray for mercy. Today's Gospel urges us to consider what we hope for in that prayer. Our friend the former leper shows up to remind us that if we are open, we can receive more than we can imagine. All the moms in heaven would tell us that if we ask for mercy, Jesus will make it all better.

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