

Sunday, February 12, 2012

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany / Lectionary 6

INTRODUCTION

The leper is confident in Jesus' power to heal. Naaman, on the other hand, is comically hard to convince that he can be healed by such an unlikely foreigner as Elisha, who directs him to wash in such a sorry excuse for a river as the Jordan. Jesus' healing power is here among us in the ordinary water of the font, in the ordinary bread, in the ordinary people who make up the body of Christ. We would be well-advised to take the advice of the least powerful among us (like the servant girl in Naaman's household) if we want to find the one who will heal us.

Worship and Awe

This beautifully concise account in which Jesus frees a leper from his affliction is not simply a story of healing. It is an encapsulation of the very nature and purpose of worship.

Note the stages of the leper's interaction with Jesus—supplication, presentation, and thanksgiving. He approaches Jesus on his knees, humankind's most penitential posture. He opens himself fully to Jesus in all his vulnerability, begging him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." When Jesus acts accordingly, the man is overcome with gratitude so that, despite Jesus' stern warning not to tell anyone (and to go straight to the priest for certification of his cleansing), he promptly goes out and spreads the news far and wide.

Are not these stages the same as ours in the act of worship? We enter in humility and reverence. We pray fervently to be freed from all that turns our hearts away from God. Through the act of opening our hearts fully to God's mercy and grace, we experience healing. We are not simply cured but are *set free*, just as the leper in was in Mark's account: "Immediately, the leprosy left him." Finally, we are moved through our experience of healing and grace to the act of evangelism—spreading the good news, just as did the healed leper.

Every encounter with the living God offers us endless possibilities for healing and transformation. Let us enter into worship with the same reverence and awe as the leper brought to his encounter with Jesus, so that through our example others may be moved to do the same.

PRAYER OF THE DAY (ELW)

Almighty and ever-living God, with mercy you look upon our weaknesses. Stretch out your wondrous hand to protect us from danger and restore us to health, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

FIRST READING: 2 Kings 5:1–14

Elisha tells Naaman, a Syrian general, to immerse himself in the Jordan River to be cleansed of his leprosy. Initially refusing to do this humble act, Naaman eventually obeys and is healed, revealing not the magic of the water but the power of Israel's God.

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look

and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." ⁸But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" ¹⁴So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

PSALM (ELW): Psalm 30

My God, I cried out to you, and you restored me to health. (Ps. 30:2)

¹I will exalt you, O LORD, because you have lifted me up and have not let my enemies triumph over me.

²O LORD my God, I cried out to you, and you restored me to health.

³You brought me up, O LORD, from the dead; you restored my life as I was going down to the grave.

⁴Sing praise to the LORD, ¹all you faithful; give thanks in holy remembrance.

⁵God's wrath is short; God's favor lasts a lifetime. Weeping spends the night, but joy comes in the morning.

⁶While I felt secure, I said, "I shall never be disturbed.

⁷You, LORD, with your favor, made me as strong as the mountains."

Then you hid your face, and I was filled with fear.

⁸I cried to you, O LORD; I pleaded with my Lord, saying,

⁹"What profit is there in my blood, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you or declare your faithfulness?

¹⁰Hear, O LORD, and have mercy upon me; O LORD, be my helper."

¹¹You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

¹²Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing; O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever.

SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 9:24–27

Using the athletic imagery of a runner and a boxer, Paul illustrates to the Corinthians how Christians have a focus committed to the ministry of the gospel, so that their victorious goal is not individual glory but eternal life for all.

²⁴Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. ²⁵Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. ²⁶So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; ²⁷but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

GOSPEL: Mark 1:40–45

Jesus cures a leper and asks him to tell no one but a priest, in accordance with Levitical law. Though Jesus performs miracles, his identity as Messiah will not be understood until the cross.

⁴⁰A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean."

⁴¹Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!"

⁴²Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, ⁴⁴saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." ⁴⁵But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.