

[Readings: 2 Kings 5:14-17; Psalm 981; 2 Timothy 2:8-13; Luke 17:11-19]

This Gospel passage always reminds me of one of the first homilies I ever gave in my ordained ministry. I was still a transitional deacon at St. Mary Our Lady of the Snows Parish in Milford. This was probably my third Sunday homily ever given, in October of 1981. You have to know the commercial jingle for Dr. Pepper which was popular at that time to understand the punchline of this story. Trying to be a little dramatic, during my homily on today's Gospel, I pointed at various spots in the congregation and shouted, "YOU'RE a leper! YOU'RE a leper! YOU'RE a leper!" At the end of Mass, the parish choir filed out of church and sang to me, "He's a leper, she's a leper, and you should be a leper, too!"

One of the many delights I enjoy about children is how they respond when I give them something. There is a momentary pause of silence, and then I hear from the grown-up who is with them say – say it with me -- "What do you say?" Then the little one would say, "Thank you!"

Little Sarah was raised well by her parents. When she was two years old, she was extremely active. One day Sarah ran into the kitchen in search of a mid-afternoon snack. Hurriedly, she said to her mother: "Banana, Momma, Banana!"

Jodi, her mother, handed her a banana. Sarah quickly grabbed the banana and turned to rush back out of the kitchen. But before she took very many steps, her mother said: "Sarah, come back. What do you say?" Sarah screeched to a halt, turned back around and said: "Please! Thank You! You're Welcome! God Bless You! And I Love You, Mommy!" Sarah covered all her bases! The only words Sarah's mother was looking for were "Thank you."

Why did only one man cleansed from leprosy return to thank Jesus? Someone has made a list of nine suggested reasons why the nine did not return: One waited to see if the cure was real. One waited to see if it would last. One said he would see Jesus later. One decided that he had never had leprosy in the first place. One said he would have gotten well anyway. One gave the glory to the priests. One said, "O, well, Jesus didn't really do anything." One said, "Any rabbi could have done it." One said, "I was already much improved."

Naaman, the main character in today's First Reading, is the equivalent of a four-star general. He also had a skin condition which some thought was leprosy. Elijah the prophet tells Naaman to bathe seven times – the perfect number of times – in the Jordan River in order to be healed. Naaman is offended, because he could have saved himself a long trip to Judah and bathed in the much better waters of his homeland, Syria. But he humbles himself and does what Elijah tells him to do. The results are found in today's words in our First Reading. Naaman was looking for healing; he got that and more: faith.

St. Paul reminds us in our Second Reading that God's Word will not be silenced, regardless of how bad the messenger or the mediator of the Word is, or how badly they would be treated. Despite his own being chained in prison, God's Word would not be chained for the second and third generation of Christian believers. To profess your Christian faith in the first three centuries of the Church's existence meant persecution, imprisonment and probably death.

Some of the words in our Second Reading are believed to be words of the most ancient liturgy known to us. We sing some of those words in the hymn: "Keep in Mind." The words of that hymn are not sappy and syrupy sweet. They are words of deep faith and a careful warning: If we deny Jesus Christ, He will deny us. If we are unfaithful, Jesus Christ will still remain faithful, pursuing us like a relentless hound looking for his owner.

These words bring up the boldness with which we preach the Gospel in mission territory, a good prelude for the upcoming observance of World Mission Sunday next week. We offer our prayers and our financial support for our brothers and sisters in mission territory. One pastor put this message over each of his church exits. Another pastor put a different message: "Judas left Mass early, too." But the pastor I am referring to has this on his message: "You are now entering mission territory." Isn't that amazing? The moment you leave this holy place, you are entering mission territory. In your community. In your home. In your school. In your workplace. At the shopping center. You are now entering mission territory.

Pope Francis has called this month of October an “Extraordinary Missionary Month” and entrusted this year’s World Mission Sunday to Pope St. John Paul II, whose new feast day is celebrated on October 22nd. He said, “I urge everyone to live the joy of mission by witnessing the Gospel where each one lives and works.” Sounds like the Pope is calling all of us to become “joyful, missionary disciples!” We, indeed, all of us are “Sent on Mission.”

The Pope further says, “We are called upon to support with affection, concrete help and prayer, the missionaries who have gone out to proclaim Christ to those who still do not yet know Him.” We do this with our annual collection for World Mission Sunday is next Sunday. There should be special envelopes at the sides of the offertory boxes.

We do not undertake this mission alone. We are armed by God, by the Church, by the Sacraments. By the teachings of our Church.

Just before takeoff on an airplane flight, the stewardess reminded a much younger champion boxer Mohammed Ali to fasten his seatbelt. Ali protested to her: “Superman don’t need no seatbelt! The stewardess replied sharply, “Superman don’t need no airplane either!” Ali smiled and then fastened his seat belt. Arrogance sometimes is an invitation to a surprise act of humility, or in this case, humiliation. The lesson here is; we cannot fly solo.

We can’t make it on our own. There is no Superman. So we better fasten our seatbelts. And one of the ways to do it is to practice gratitude.

We start with saying “thank you.” As I have said before, I start every morning by saying, “Thank you,” seven times, because in biblical numerology, seven is the perfect number. Like Naaman washing seven times in the Jordan River. I am thanking God the perfect number of times.

Next, listen to and watch for those moments that happen throughout the day, where you can say “thank you.” The big and small moments of daily life.

A wise woman recently said to me: What if *tomorrow* you woke up with only the things you thanked Jesus for *today*?

So... What do we say to Jesus? “Thank You!” AMEN!