St Pius & St Anthony 28th Sunday Ordinary Time Year C(2025) Luke

There's a wonderful parallel between the gospel about a Samaritan leper (Lk 17), and the first reading about Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5). Both readings describe healings of 1) 'lepers', 2) who are also outsiders-foreigners and 3) who are 'falling down' grateful and publicly demonstrate it. Interestingly, it's safe to assume that Luke also thought of these stories similarly, because Luke brings up the example of Naaman being uniquely healed in Luke 4:27, when Jesus warns his hometown not to take Him for granted and reject Him – that many outsiders were open and warmer to his message than them. Sadly, they go ahead and reject him. Now, the whole Naaman story itself makes for a great message, but we hear only a snippet of it, and likely we are all wondering together about that curious detail of Naaman asking permission to take home two muleloads of dirt? What is that?

Do you remember, the old T-Shirts theme, from the 1970-80's, and there were millions of variations of them made, but they all had words written on the front of the shirt that said something like "My brother went to Las Vegas", and then on the back, it said, "and all I got was this lousy shirt." They joked and expressed jealous envy at not being asked to go along on the trip. I wonder if a version of such shirts might apply to Naaman's servants back at home, who could puzzle over his odd souvenir of dirt. They'd have shirts that read, "***My General went to Judea and was healed, and all we got was work-two loads of dirt!"***

But why did Naaman want dirt to take home? Because the dirt would ever-after remind him, of his healing encounter with the living God-God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob. Maybe Naaman takes the dirt home and creates a little prayer garden of it scattering it across his courtyard, to kneel upon it daily and continue praying in thanksgiving to the living God who healed him.

Maybe we've done something like this, when we've been through a powerful experience somewhere and we slip out with us something of the place as a memento. I have a little pebble in my office cabinet that a friend brought back from the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem – the idea being that maybe the rock was along the path of Christ's walk to Calvary over 2,000 years ago-maybe it touched his foot. Of course, that's not at all likely. No, rather, such thinking may be like 'rock roulette'! But it is a tangible reminder of the past events, and having been there! We all have a tendency to pick up a memento to keep in touch with positive experiences we've had to carry back home with us (even though how many signs in national parks tell us, "*Take out of the park only what you brought in, and leave everything else as you found it!")*

Well, in Naaman's case with the dirt, he wanted to keep in contact with the experience of Elisha's God that he had in that northern coastal area of Canaan. He wanted to keep a connection to that experience by holding/ carrying something physical from the encounter – the dirt.

His action, reminds me of our Diocese' previous bishop, Bishop McRaith. All bishops wear a large pectoral cross, a distinctive sign of the office of Bishop. It hangs visibly upon his chest in Liturgy or it may be in his left shirt or jacket pocket otherwise, suspended over his heart. But Bishop McRaith's cross was unique in that, at each directional end of the cross, he had a glass vial of enclosed dirt (four vials) on it from his places of ministry-service, one of his home farm in Hutchison, Minnesota, another of his home diocese of New Ulm MN, one from his time serving in Iowa as executive director of Bishops' Rural Life Cmte, and finally one as Bishop of Owensboro Diocese, from his St Raphael farm *(before himself returning to the dust in peace, at Mt St Joseph Cemetery in 2017).* The dirt he carried along with him, was his way of keeping/feeling in touch with the people, the land he served. So, Naaman wants to carry dirt home with him, a physical reminder of his healing, to keep an 'aware' connection to the presence of God that he experienced there.

And if we ask, what is the primary link between the Old Testament Naaman story to our gospel of the Ten Lepers being healed? I'd suggest it is about the ***return to the scene of our healing***, keeping contact with the source of our healing, and cultivating a constant expression of gratitude because of it!

It is so striking to me in this story that Jesus commands the ten lepers to "Go show yourselves to the priests" (Luke 17:14). Where would those priests be? Maybe all the way to the Jerusalem Temple, but also maybe to a local resident priest at some outpost of the temple, maybe the local synagogue (maybe like with a corner office space, like Lucy in the Peanuts cartoon strip with her psychiatric booth, and its sign "The Doctor is In"). That would be the proper procedure, to visit the priest to get your ''All Healed" Stamp of Approval, or the 'Doctor's Release to go Back to Work Letter'. But we might think the Samaritan Leper is disobeying Jesus (recall that Jesus told them "Go show yourself to the priest") yet this ***Samaritan goes back to Jesus***. But the Samaritan knows! It is only the Samaritan who realizes who the Real Priest is, & where the Real Temple-Presence of God is**- It is Jesus.** Jesus is the high priest (Hebrews 4:14-16). So, it's the one Samaritan who realizes who is His Priest & Temple. It is Jesus. This Samaritan knows who healed him – and he eagerly gives Jesus praise, glory and credit for his new life!

Yet another striking detail to me is the graduated step by step process of the lepers' healing. The Samaritan seems to be the quickest on the draw to realize that he was being healed or was healed as he went along the way. He senses the healing while it was happening (Is that like wounds that itch to show they are healing – or recently I had two blisters from some outside shovel work that ran their course, and in their last stage healing I felt the new skin's tightness as it adjusted to rest of the hand's surface and movements. With these lepers, their healing wasn't instantaneous. It happened in steps, as they went on their way. I compare the process of them being healed in stages, of the game we played as

kids called ‘Hot & Cold’ when someone searches out a hidden object. You guide them to it by saying, “You are getting warm, warmer, hot, hotter, burning…..but if they turn away in the wrong direction, you interject, “Oh cold, colder, ice” to redirect them. Here, the Samaritan leper realizes that as he discovers he is healed, then the farther and farther he walks away from Jesus, the colder and colder he feels, until he turns back to Jesus feeling the warmth of life and new energy in his heart and body again, returning to life as he’s drawn back to Jesus- He is certainly excited as the scripture tells us that he is buoyant with joy. It says he was *“glorifying God in a loud voice; and fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked Jesus”* (Luke 17:15-16). Interestingly, this is the same descriptive phrase used about the shepherds who visited Jesus at his birth, before they went telling everyone about Jesus, “over the hills and everywhere….” Again, this Samaritan outsider is an example to us, of not overlooking who is in our presence – and keeping in contact with Him, knowing who our healer is, who our peace is. This source of life for us– the real priest and real temple of God’s Presence is Jesus. And He is always right here, right now in this sacrament of the Holy Eucharist-our thanksgiving!