

Sunday, October 10, 2010: 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

by [Paul Stroble](#) in the [October 5, 2010](#) issue

The reading from 2 Kings tells us about Naaman, commander of the Syrian army and a leper. When Naaman heard about the prophet Elisha through one of his wife's maids, he sought out the prophet and arrived at his house with a full entourage.

For unspecified reasons, Elisha did not meet the Syrian commander personally but told him, through a messenger, to wash himself in the Jordan. Naaman was offended. The cure seemed foolish, he felt inconvenienced, and Elisha's ignorance of protocol was outrageous. Servants gently told Naaman to take the advice, and sure enough, he was cured—and humbled. He returned to Elisha, entourage in tow, and affirmed "that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."

In our Gospel lesson, the ten lepers called to Jesus as he entered a village in the area between Samaria and Galilee. As with Naaman and Elisha, Jesus did not meet directly with the men but told them to "show yourselves to the priests." They complied, perhaps pleased with any advice and attention. Not all biblical healings involve a command to follow an instruction—a call to obedience—but in these two stories, healing came as the result of the person's willingness to do something that on first sight might seem irrelevant.

The lepers all received healing. What a happy shock that must've been! But only one, a Samaritan, returned and thanked Jesus. The text didn't specify the nationality of the other nine, but by calling him a "foreigner," Jesus expressed an irony. Earlier in the Gospel, Luke 4:27, Jesus alluded to the uniqueness of Naaman's healing during the time of Elisha; Jesus already knew that his mission would extend beyond Israel. Yet in verses 17 and 18, we glimpse a hint of wistfulness that Jesus' compassion, while not motivated by a desire for praise, went unrecognized—except by someone who was not one of Jesus' own people. As in the story of Naaman, a gentile praised the God of Israel and showed humble gratitude.

The character of both Naaman and the Samaritan leper interests me. The Samaritan was grateful for his healing and displayed spontaneous thanks. Of course, we don't know the fellow's name, let alone the emotional journey behind the gratitude that

made him a Bible lesson for the centuries. One assumes that his malady made him desperate to try anything, but when healing did come, he was not so consumed by his experience of pain and ostracism that he was oblivious to the source of his freedom.

Many of us will identify as much with Naaman as with the Samaritan. His experience, after all, was about feeling foolish when he acted arrogantly. I remember a student who, on the first day of class, made a lot of noise with her notebook. I almost scolded her but held my tongue—which was fortunate, because I soon realized that she was taking notes in Braille. I'd never seen that done, and nothing about her had called attention to a disability. At least I learned humility without looking dumb. During the semester we chatted, and she shared with me aspects of studying for a bachelor's degree though legally blind.

Although he was irritated, Naaman was humble enough to listen to the advice of his servants, as well as the prompting of the Israelite maid. Once healed, he gave the proper thanks to God. Like many of us, he grew in humility when he realized that God doesn't act according to personal expectations.

It's de rigueur to affirm that God's ways and thoughts are unlike ours. We affirm God's unpredictable blessings throughout the Christian year, especially during certain seasons when, for instance, we point out the commonness of John the Baptist among the world's mighty, the unostentatious circumstances of Jesus' birth and the strangeness of a crucified Messiah. Yet we often go about our own obedient discipleship with the assumption that God works within parameters we've set and expectations we impose. Ironically, being obedient to God's direction may increase our sense of entitlement: I'm a church leader, I've spent time praying and doing God's will, thus God will do a great thing exactly as I expect.

What a terrible self-imposed burden to assume that God's work is based on our expectations and efforts, and what an opening for disappointment! Humility is a way that we gain new eyes, so to speak, about God's work among us. Humility not only characterizes our attitude toward God and others but also provides a fresh sense of discernment about what God is doing and through whom (perhaps a complete surprise) God is working.

Reading these lessons helped me see something in the epistle lesson with new eyes. One would assume that when a person is locked up he would be downcast because

he cannot do the work he wants to do. But Paul has confidence that God's power can carry on quite well without him. "The word of God is not chained," he declares with a freedom and confidence that many overstressed church workers have yet to experience.

We maintain a tricky balance. God often calls us to do certain things in order that his will may be accomplished. Yet God's power, mercies and lessons are far more unexpected and all-encompassing than we'd ever dream, which keeps us from thinking that God acts according to our expectations. Discerning God's will while growing in both humility and gratitude become two sides of the same coin: growing in the faith that heals.