

**ORDINARY TIME TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY YEAR C 2010 HOMILY
(2 Kings 5: 14-17; 2 Timothy 2: 8-13; Luke 17: 11-19)**

TO SERVE IS TO GIVE THANKS

When I was in high school, I belonged to a service club made up of boys and girls from Catholic schools in the Columbus area. One of our projects was to visit a home for men with severe cerebral palsy run by the Brothers of the Good Shepherd. This home was under the patronage of St. Martin de Porres and, as I remember, it was on Rich Street in the downtown area where Franklin University is now.

It was a little scary to go to the St. Martin de Porres Home. It was hard for us kids to relate to the men. We were full of energy and of a desire to serve – and we had only the best intentions. But I remember how hard it was to make conversation with the residents because their condition was often so severe that we could not understand them and we (or at least I) would have to ask them to repeat often. This was embarrassing to me and taxing to the men. We would also sometimes help out at meals – to give the Good Shepherd brothers a break. This was big challenge too because many of the men had to be fed by one of us and the food would a lot of time end up anywhere but in their mouths. Perhaps the best part of our visit was when we entertained the residents – by doing a sing-a-long or an occasional silly skit.

As I look back on this experience, the most important thing about it was that we went – we just did it (to paraphrase the Nike commercial). The brothers and the patients were very thankful to us. And we young people had a real sense that we were showing our gratitude to God for all the gifts that we had received in our lives – and most of us were unbelievably lucky and blessed. We had been given so much for which to be thankful. As I look back on it, I would have to say that growing up in the late 1950's was a very special grace.

The fact that we were a little uncomfortable in this service project at St. Martin's made it all the more meaningful for us. We were stretched. We wandered into unfamiliar territory. We took the risk of trying to relate to people different from us – people on the margins, people in great need of warmth and kindness. All of this challenged us – but none of it hurt us. It was good for us – we were the main beneficiaries of this memorable experience.

Today's gospel (from St. Luke) is both about the need to give thanks and about the need to challenge and stretch ourselves for the good of others. The thanks part is straightforward enough. Only one leper came back to give thanks – and he was a Samaritan (that is someone the Jews considered an outcast). This reminds us of the duty to be always grateful to God – and to express this gratitude frequently in prayer. Furthermore, we as human beings and as Christians have a true need to be thankful. This gospel is often used on Thanksgiving Day, the quintessentially American Holiday. [Canada has a Thanksgiving Day too.] It is certainly fitting that America has a Thanksgiving Day and that it is so important to us – because there are few people on earth or in history who have ever had as much to be thankful for as we do – most of us, at least. So let us give thanks and praise to God always!

But, as I mentioned, today's gospel is also about our need to stretch ourselves – to put ourselves out for others. In this story about the ten lepers from St. Luke, we encounter Jesus wandering along the borders of Samaria and Galilee. Now Samaria was the territory where a race of Jewish heretics lived. The ancestors of these folks were once Jews, but they had fallen away from the faith - and the Jews despised them and would have nothing to do with them. But Jesus was there! And Galilee was the less

purely Jewish part of ancient Palestine. Judea, the other part of Palestine, was the more homogenous Jewish territory. So for a Jew to be in Galilee was to risk defilement. But Jesus was there! Furthermore, in this gospel Jesus ministers to lepers – outcasts and untouchables on the fringes of society – the profoundly marginalized of his time. And Jesus is there in the midst of them! He reached out and cured them. This gospel is about giving thanks, but it is perhaps even more about the disciples' call to reach out as Jesus did – to reach out as we high school kids did so long ago at the Martin de Porres home.

So I think that this gospel story serves to remind us that giving verbal thanks is not enough for the Christian disciple. If we want to be truly grateful and truly happy, the grace of God will always move us to be more serious about our discipleship. And so this grace will help us to risk wandering with Jesus through the Galilees and the Samarias of our community and our world. Jesus ended up in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship that was focused on the temple. But his ministry was always at the margins and with the iffy people of his time. And he found these folks in the diverse territory of Galilee and even in the hostile territory of Samaria. This is where he did God's work – as surely as he also did it in Jerusalem through his passion, death, and resurrection. Following in Christ's footsteps, we too will always be willing to leave the world of our comfortable religion to serve our human brothers and sisters across the border from what is easy and familiar for us. It is across this border that we will find Jesus in the guise of the poor and the sick and the unemployed and the unborn and the sinner – just as surely as we find him in the Eucharist we are about to share. And remember that Eucharist means to give thanks.