

A new young priest was calling on an elderly woman who could no longer get to church. Ms. Sally was quite old and in a nursing home. The young cleric was quite nervous as it was his first such call, and he kept eating peanuts from a bowl beside her bed. When he got up to leave, he noticed that he had eaten all of the peanuts. "I'm so sorry. I ate up all of your peanuts," he stammered. "Oh, that's all right," Ms. Sally replied, "I'd already gummed all of the chocolate off of them anyway."

We know this gospel story very well. But perhaps we could see it in a new light. I would suggest that this gospel has something profound to say to us especially at this moment in our history. And it does so in three ways, for basically it's a gospel that speaks of loss, of time, and of gratitude.

First, concerning loss. Leprosy was rather common in 1st century Palestine, and the disease represented a terrible loss in a person's life. Loss of health, mobility, livelihood and perhaps, worst of all, the loss of community. There was such a fear of contamination that lepers were isolated and segregated from the rest of society. They were shunned like pariahs and forced to live on the fringes of villages, where they begged for their survival. It's hard to imagine anything worse than being forever isolated from the mainstream of life, from all we have ever loved.

But these lepers of our story represent people with loss in their lives – and that would mean most of us: loss of loved ones, loss of health, loss of employment, loss of a marriage, loss of trust, dignity, self-esteem, loss of faith in government, church, our institutions, loss of security. Like the lepers, some time or another, we all know loss. Hold this in mind.

Second, this gospel speaks of time. This is very intriguing and also very significant. It's there in the text: "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" And when Jesus saw them, He said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." 'And *as they were going* they were cleansed.' Did we get that? *As they were going* they were cleansed. They weren't healed instantly on the spot, right then and there as happened on other occasions. *They were healed later, on the way*, perhaps even much later. This is important to remember.

When did they first notice the healing? How far had they gotten? How long was it? -- an hour, a day, a week, a month, maybe years? Did they simply, at one point, notice that the skin had cleared up, the spots had disappeared? Was it sudden or was it gradual? We don't know and the text does not say. All we know is that they were cured, not right away, but ON the way, that is, on their life journey. And I think that this, in fact, is how it happens for most of us.

Oh we've probably all heard stories of some people with the leprosy of depression or sadness, the loss of their loved ones, the drying up of faith, the slavery of addiction to drugs or alcohol or sex, the at-their-wits-end over a sick or wayward or difficult child – some, we know, cried out like those ten lepers, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" And He did! Right away. They found immediate healing. SOME do. Some do, but very few.

It's not that way for most of us. Most of us, like those lepers, continue to plod on with our lives, treading our life's journey, deeply wounded and crying out again and again, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" till we are tired of it, till we wonder if anyone is listening, till we wonder if we'll EVER find peace and healing. But, emboldened by this gospel, I suggest we claim our hope, the promise that it holds out to us: that, almost subconsciously, quite imperceptibly, along the way, on our journey, however long, just like those lepers, healing does happen, WILL happen, in strange and different and surprising ways.

I think of Michael Hingson. He was born blind. Yet he and his dog somehow escaped the collapsing Twin Towers of New York on September 11th. Naturally, he made the news. He says he has never taken his handicap as an excuse to do nothing. He says, "I grew up in a family where my parents insisted that I had the same responsibilities as everybody else. I understood that my life was what I was going to make of it. So, I worked." He earned a master's degree in physics, got married, and became a regional manager at his firm. He also devotes himself to the Guide Dog Association where he encourages independence for blind children.

He was born blind. Like the lepers he was isolated by his blindness. He prayed for a miracle. His prayer was granted, but not in the way he thought. It was only on the way, as his life unfolded, that grace abounded for him. It is because of him, and because of his blindness, his loss, that many children learn to cope.

Bryan and Renee Cloyd lost their daughter Austin at the terrible tragedy at Virginia Tech in 2007 where 33 people were killed by a lone gunman. They could not bring their daughter back to life, but on the long journey of their grief, they took the many donations sent them and, in their daughter's name, gave them all to a program that repairs dilapidated houses in the poorest parts of Appalachia. A death gave way to hope for many poor people.

Hundreds of mothers who lost children in drunk driving accidents have formed MADD – Mothers Against Drunk Driving. They have changed legislation, raised awareness, and statistics indicate that they have saved other families from the same loss. They can't bring their children back – but they can be healed along the way.

Do they or any others ever forget what they lost? No. But – and this is the point – in time, that grief will no longer be central. Serving others as a means to saving other lives now is a path to their journey of healing. That's what I mean. It will take time. Healing will happen 'on the way' to bring us to another, deeper stage of our lives as personal grief moves to communal love and service. These stories tell us that over time, "on the way," healing can take place. The scars will always remain. There will always be bad moments when we break down and cry over our losses, but the difference is that they will no longer be the center of our lives. That's the key, the miracle: our losses and grief are never forgotten, but they will no longer define us. Helping others will. That's when we will know we are healed along the way. Our losses will have rendered us wounded healers, full of empathy for those in a similar situation, bent on the good that we can do and which arose from our own tragedies.

Finally, this gospel presents us with gratitude. The lepers came back – at least one did – to give thanks. My message is that if we are faithful to the spiritual journey we can overcome bitterness, we will learn to give thanks from the ashes of our losses: and to give thanks for the acceptance, the forgiveness, the patience, the growth we have experienced.

About 20 or so years ago, there was a great movie starring Dustin Hoffman called LITTLE BIG MAN. Towards the end of the movie, there is a very touching scene in which a Native American named Old Lodge Skins has lost his physical health and is going blind; he knows he is dying and he begins to pray to God. This is his prayer: "O Lord God, I thank you for having made me a human being, I thank you for giving me life and for giving me eyes to see and enjoy your world. But most of all, Lord, I thank you for my sickness and my blindness because I have learned more from these than from my health and from my sight."

And THAT, also, I think, would be the ultimate reason why, like Old Lodge Skins, we would show gratitude for our losses. They can contain hidden blessings.

I end with an old prayer:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve; I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things; I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy; I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of all; I was given weakness that I might feel the need for God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things;

I got nothing that I asked for; but everything I had hoped for.

Almost in spite of myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am, among all people, most richly blessed. Amen. (entire homily adapted from William Bausch, FROM NO TO YES, (2018), p. 237-241)